ASSASSIN'S CREED CAN YOU TRUST SYNDICATE?

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WORLD EXCLUSIVE
MIYAMOTO ON MARIO
"WE'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO BE UNIQUE"



MAFIA III
Gangs, guns and mardi gras

BATTLEFRONT BLOWS US AWAY
Incredible new gameplay dissected

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BRING IT BACK!
Long-lost games worthy of a return

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I guess I must have been about 14 years old when the Nintendo 64 was about to launch. I wasn't getting it on launch day, though. This was going to be the first console I bought with my own money. My friend, an even bigger Nintendo fan than me at the time, was going to beat me to it as his birthday was coming up and the anticipation was killing us both.

So much so that he didn't wait for the machine to be handed to him before going out and buying a bright yellow N64 controller so we would be ready for some split-screen multiplayer action. And the yellow pad sat there in his bedroom, taunting us both.

We were so rabid for information on the N64 and its games we bought every magazine we could and among them was an unofficial publication with a VHS tape showing off the upcoming library of N64 games. We were desperate for a taste of *Super Mario 64*, *Pilotwings 64* and *Mario Kart 64* and we wore the tape out watching the gameplay footage over and over, all the while holding that unplugged yellow trident gamepad in our hands, mimicking what we imagined were the moves on screen.

Clearly we were a pair of obsessive Nintendo nerds, but while my example may be particularly extreme, Nintendo is a special company that has earned such devotion. Much of the credit for that belongs to the two game-makers we had the pleasure of speaking to this issue.

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




Super Mario Bros.


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66 Feature

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

Ubisoft's new Creed team makes its case for why Syndicate will win back fans and rebuild faith in the series

Discuss



(THE JOY OF RIDING SOLO)

The rebirth of single-player

→ ...and how their multiplayer rivals are falling behind



A **couple of years ago**, it was the norm for a single-player game to ship with a tacked-on multiplayer mode. From a publisher's perspective, this made sense; it was supposed to keep games alive for longer, it was supposed to keep them flying off the shelves, it was supposed to 'continue the conversation'.

But as more and more games found ways to crowbar network support into titles that *really* didn't need it (*Tomb Raider, Assassin's Creed, The Last Of Us*) players began to become disillusioned. Publishers saw that their games were selling no better or worse than before, and people were ignoring the multiplayer modes altogether. Despite running double experience weekends, special events and story-themed playlists, *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer was a ghost town within months of its release.



Below Multiplayer games like *Destiny* are offering periodic refinements to gameplay – *The Taken King* is basically Destiny 2.0, for example.

Games like *Deus Ex* are forgoing the multiplayer mode entirely, to focus on the strengths of narrative storytelling in gaming. "There's two different ways things work in our games – encounters, or what we like to call 'social debates'," explains Olivier Proulx of Eidos Montreal, talking about *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*. "A social debate is not like a boss fight. The thing we're thinking about is that, in a 2015 game, what *is* a boss fight, you know? Do you really need all these tropes? Can we leave the idea a bit more open? If you're playing stealth, or if you're playing non-lethal, the game has to be consistent the whole way."

It's because the game is focusing on the single-player experience that Eidos can focus on deconstructing the 'boss fight' template, it can focus on giving something to players that they haven't experienced before. That – alongside the way *Mankind Divided* challenges genre

DATA STREAM → FALLOUT 4 WILL HAVE NO 'ENDING' AND NO LEVEL CAP, ACCORDING TO BETHESDA

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conventions (is it stealth, is it an RPG, is it action-adventure?) pushes innovation forward as multiplayer games rest on their laurels.

Naughty Dog has dropped the multiplayer entirely for *Uncharted 4*, deciding to focus more on Drake. "We focus more on the character arc, what story beats we need to hit, where we need them to get to, what we need to hit them with, what small arc do they *have* to have right now, and what mechanics can we use to sustain these beats and make sure it all happens together," says Josh Scherr, the game's writer.

"For the narrative side, [to make that stick in a player's mind]… I can't say it enough; it's always about how these narrative beats *scale*. You have to make sure they're on point because that's how you get your players to keep playing your game – to make them care."

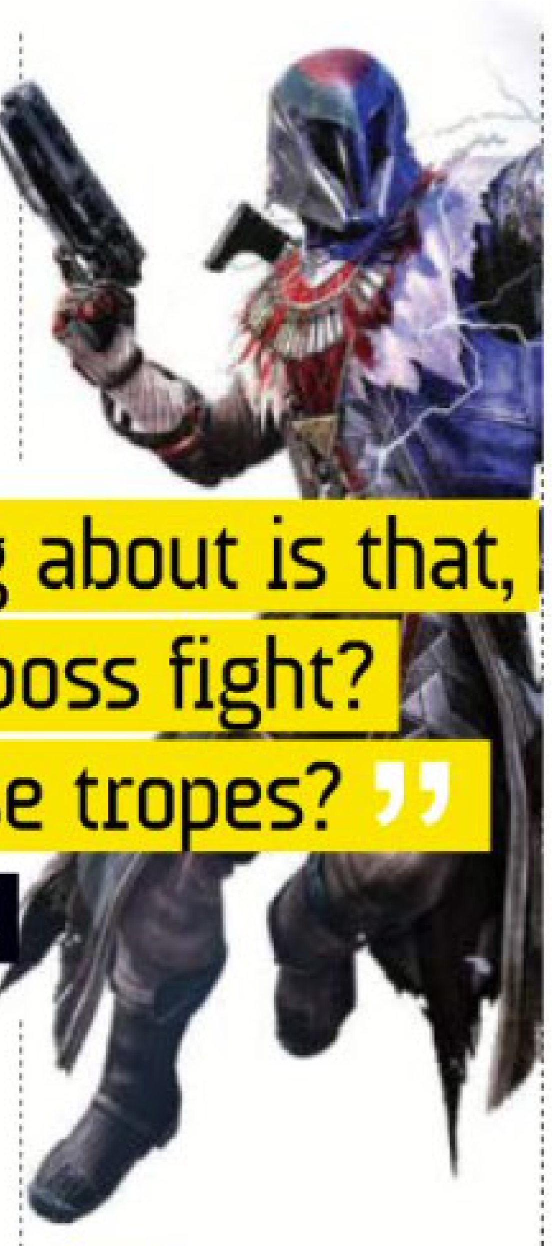


Inset Games like *Tomb Raider* can afford to focus far more on making the player feel more involved in the world when they drop multiplayer modes.

> "The thing we're thinking about is that, in a 2015 game, what is a boss fight? Do you really need all these tropes?"
>
> Olivier Proulx, producer, Eidos Montreal

So where multiplayer games try to get players to invest more and more in the gameplay by introducing elements of grinding, looting or level progression, single-player games rely more in an emotional investment from the player. Is that why we're seeing so many titles drop the multiplayer, and focus on that difficult but oh-so-rewarding single player narrative?

An alternative theory is that the way games are sold is impacting the way they're made now, too. Upcoming games on the PS4's digital storefront will be sold at a lower pricepoint than average retail releases, meaning developers can focus on creating shorter, more impactful narrative products. *Journey* was marketed this way – to great acclaim – and *Hellblade* is going to do a similar thing.



Below *Mass Effect 3* never needed a multiplayer mode – the previous games in the series proved what an expansive universe already existed, without the need for a tacked-on extra mode.

As games like *Destiny*, *Titanfall* and the *Call Of Duty* franchise begin to re-cement what the multiplayer market needs to do, the single-player scene is having a mini-renaissance to itself. While multiplayer games can keep themselves alive by iterating game systems and offering extra maps, characters or challenges for players to complete together, we're seeing indies celebrate what a player can achieve *alone*, and we're seeing the triple-As venture back down a path that used to be unprofitable.

Developers can continue to turn a profit thanks to Season Passes, episodic DLC and even standalone games that can be annexed from the main game's story (*Far Cry: Blood Dragon*, *Saint's Row: Gat Out Of Hell*). It's a fascinating time to be a 'lone wolf' gamer – these next few years will be *incredibly* exciting for short-form, narratively intense gaming fiction.

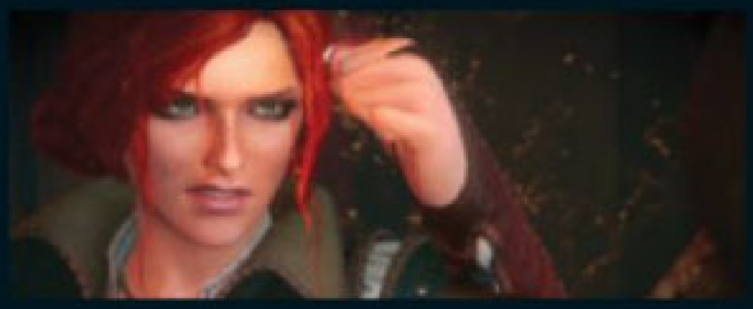


How Single-Player Games Keep You Coming Back For More

→ The many ways developers can entice you back to their narratively-heavy games

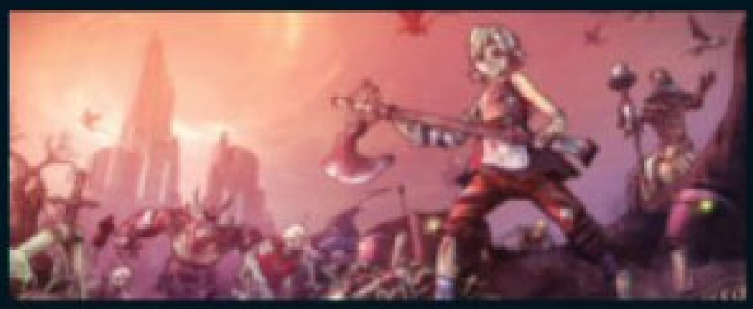
FREE DLC

■ *The Witcher 3* proved that releasing a single DLC pack a week – no matter how small it is – is an effective way of keeping player numbers up, and keeping chatter about your game alive.



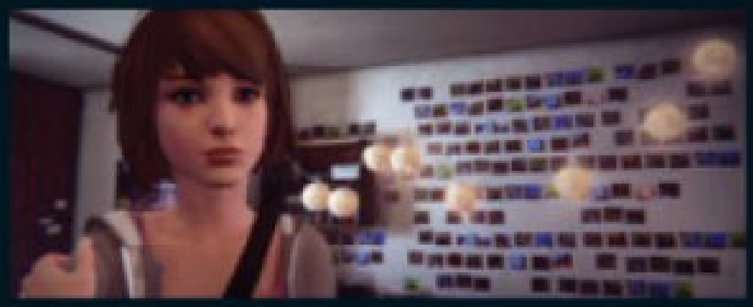
PAID DLC

■ A little controversial, games like *Borderlands*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Fallout* have generated massive peaks in player numbers by releasing substantial additions to the gameplay at less regular intervals.



EPISODIC CONTENT

■ Demonstrated by the various Telltale series on the market right now, alongside *Life Is Strange* and *King's Quest*, episodic games have the 'TV effect', with players discussing episodes weeks after they release.



TIME-LOCKED EVENTS

■ A great example are the *Batman: Arkham* games – Calendar Man will have bytes of info available depending on the date. *Pokémon* games have also made use of this, with Lapras only available on Friday evenings.



→ BIOWARE HAS CONFIRMED THERE WILL BE NO RETURNING CHARACTERS IN MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA →

Single-Player Vs Multiplayer

THE END OF 2015 is packed out. It's an exciting time to be a gamer – we've got a rich array of platforms to play on, we've got a massive variety of genres coming out, and we've even got a huge discrepancy in the price points these releases will see. Basically, no matter what your taste, there's going to be something to cater to it. One of the biggest divisions in the games that are released and the games we play, though, remains *how* we play it – is it a solo experience, or is it multiplayer-focused? With that in mind, we've designed a battle royale of sorts – a visual guide to the single-player/multiplayer showdown that'll be running riot at the end of the year.

SINGLE-PLAYER



GUITAR HERO LIVE

A huge change in direction for Activision's seminal peripheral-based rhythm action game, *Guitar Hero* this year is intended to be a more solo experience. The developers have gone for a more score-attack, leaderboard domination based game than the party game it used to be – it's leaving that side of the market to *Rock Band.*



UNCHARTED COLLECTION

The leader of the pack on the PS4 this year will be a selection of three familiar games, yet the chatter around the *Uncharted Collection* proves that there's still a high demand for narrative, for story-driven games that push the player to understand and associate with the characters they're playing as.



FALLOUT 4

This year's guaranteed single-player behemoth. The game has no true 'ending' and no level cap… which means you can just wonder around post-apocalyptic Boston levelling forever. If that's not your thing, how about importing all those patches onto your console? Or crafting your own city? There's *so* much to do!



XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X

For those of us that prefer the Japanese side of games development, there's the Wii U's *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, a game that could rival even *Fallout* in terms of the world on offer. The combat will be a bit more involved, though, and the story infinitely more ludicrous. Definitely something for the Wii U's hardcore audience.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

Not willing to suffer another embarrassment as wide as the *Unity* debacle last year, Ubisoft is doing everything it can to repair the *Assassin's Creed* brand… even down to dropping multiplayer from its game and focusing solely on local content.

MULTIPLAYER



ROCK BAND

Returning as a sequel directly compatible with all your old content, all your old instruments and all your old band skills, *Rock Band 4* is going to be *the* party game of choice for anyone with an Xbox One or PS4 over Christmas. Catered playlists, streams of content and a lot of catching up to do will certainly take over the holidays.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

The other yearly multiplayer-focused juggernaut that's been dominating Q4 for (almost) the last decade is *Call Of Duty.* We're fresh from playing the beta of *Black Ops III* and we're confident that the game is going to keep its momentum for another year – complete with the broad player base it attracts.



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT

With *Battlefront*, players were initially frustrated to note there'd be no single-player, but in a *Battlefront* game, is that necessary? You'd only be playing the same maps against bots anyway, and the way story is deftly sewn into each level's DNA takes care of that narrative problem for the main part, anyway…



ANIMAL CROSSING: AMIIBO FESTIVAL

If you prefer your Japanese gaming more social, then the new *Animal Crossing* party game might be more up your street; it's more like a board game than a traditional *Animal Crossing* game, and can only be played with more than one person, with each player needing a separate amiibo.

HALO 5

On the Xbox side, we've got a game that's made its name in multiplayer. *Halo 5* promises to renew its focus on the multiplayer facet, and has even hired pro gamers to consult on the development of the eSports-inspired game modes that will drop into the larger *Halo* experience.

J.J. ABRAMS' BAD ROBOT HAS HELPED TEAM FORTRESS 2 DEVELOP A 'FOOTBALL' MODE CALLED PASS TIME



(COURTING THE INDIES)

How Xbox won back the indie devs

→ ID@Xbox's Agostino Simonetta tells us how Microsoft rebuilt its independent credibility

ID@Xbox is about to turn two years old, and it's already clear that the program has radically changed since its inception. European manager of the scheme, Agostino Simonetta, spoke to us about how far the program has come, how it's shaping the identity of the Xbox One, and where it could possibly be going next…

It seems that ID@Xbox was a program set up to democratise game development on the Xbox One?
ID@Xbox began for the *standard* indie studio, not just the big ones like Roll-11, Team 17 or, like, Curve Studio. We wanted to make sure the program would foster innovation and experimentation, so we could allow developers to focus on their creativity and not focus on elements of game-making peripheral to development. We wanted to make it as easy as possible to for indie studios to deliver the games they wanted to make.

You must get quite a broad array of developers in your roster, then?
We've got a husband and wife team who are making their own game for the first time, as their own studio [MakinGames with *Raging Justice*]. And then there's Drop Dead Interactive: Jay [Adeloye] is an IT consultant in his day job, looking after his two daughters, and Steve [Smith] is a teacher, and they are making their game *Gear Gauntlet* for the Xbox One in the evening. ID@Xbox allows them to develop *alongside* having a day job.



Above So many triple-A games are 3D and open world; it's great to have indie games like *Wulverblade* filling that side-on action gap in the market.

Does ID@Xbox help fledgling indie developers meet certain costs associated with game development, especially on consoles, where start-up costs can be a lot higher than on PC?
So when we set ID@Xbox up, we promised our studios that anyone working with ID@Xbox would not have to buy devkits. We would provide all of them two free units, and we shoulder the cost of that. Every dev as part of the team gets two free kits and they'll never have to pay for that. The same applies for a Unity licence – we have a relationship with Unity, and it means we can give licences to all of our partners and they never have to worry about [that expiring]. In 2013, Unity was the de facto of the vast majority of indie developers, so that's why we chose that.

→ STARBREEZE IS WORKING ON A JOHN WICK GAME, BASED ON THE FILM, FOR VIRTUAL REALITY PLATFORMS



Inset The free Unity licence that the ID@Xbox scheme offers means developers can hone their craft in 2D or 3D – the former shown off exquisitely by Slain here

> "It's like we do speed-dating with developers"
> Agostino Simonetta, ID@Xbox

And how many developers do you have on your books at the moment?
We now have over a thousand developers that have Xbox One devkits in their office or in their bedroom. That's a very impressive figure… and we keep sending them out! We are not slowing down the program, not by any means. There are *hundreds* of games in development for the program, too – the week after the Game Developer's Conference, we released 124 videos of titles coming to the platform via ID@Xbox. At E3, we gave out a box full of business cards that were for games that had launched on ID@Xbox, or were going to launch on ID@Xbox… there were over 250 cards in this box.

Do you approach these developers or do they approach you?
It's a mix, actually – in fact, sometimes it's even just a referral where a studio we're working with say to us 'Hey, these guys are really cool' or even just 'These guys have something to show you, would you take a look, Ago?' The one thing we have done a lot this year is to be a lot more visible – especially in Europe. [Chris] announced at GDC that we were going to go on a global tour, and I myself have been on the road for six months now!

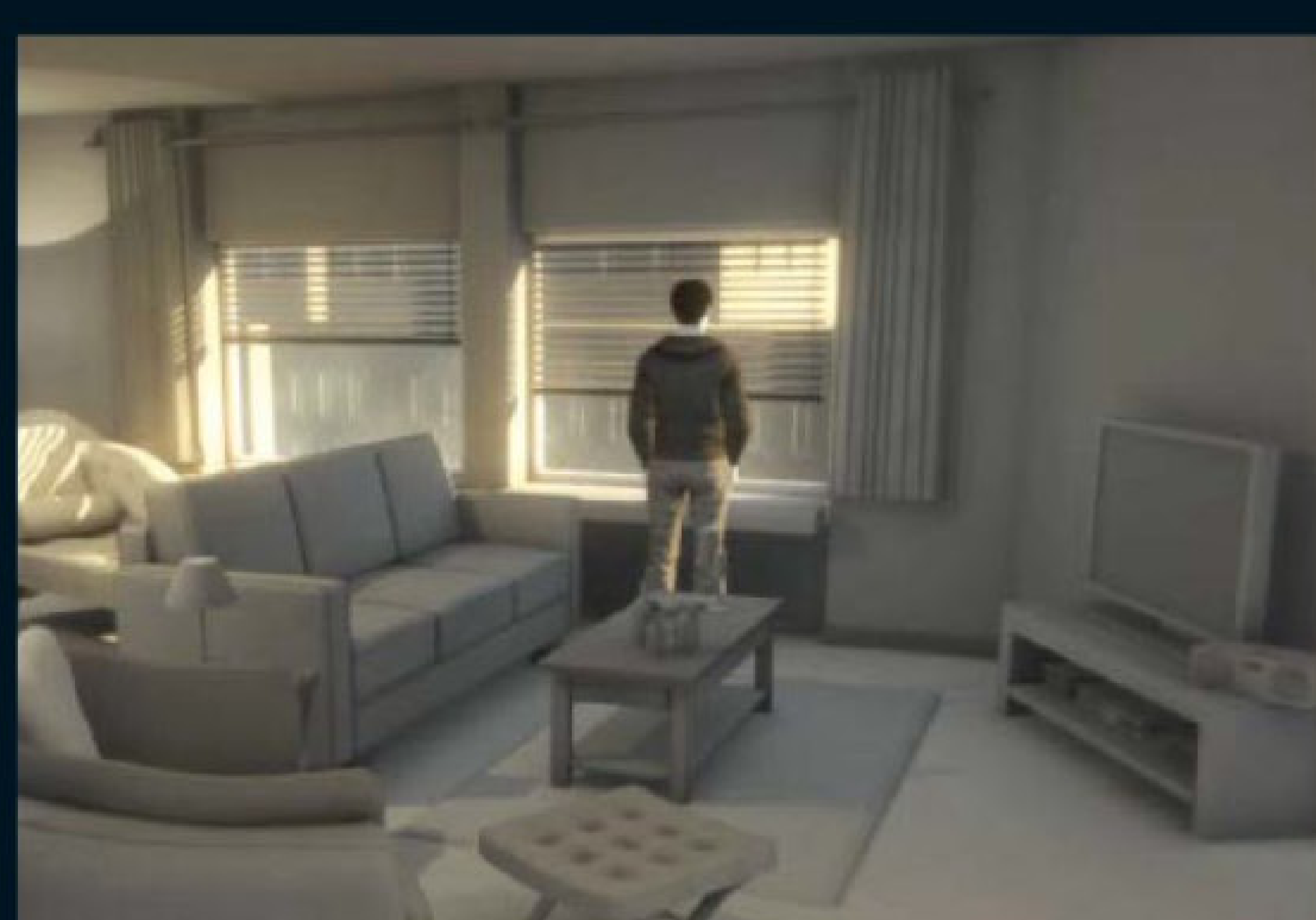
It's like we do speed-dating with developers this way – I get to spend half an hour with the developers, they can share the latest updates with me, I get to catch up with them… I build that personal relationship that I otherwise wouldn't be able to get with a thousand developers in the scheme this way, you know? That's important to me. That relationship results in trust between us and [the devs], and I like that a lot.



Below Even the more serious side of gaming is being tackled by ID@Xbox – *Fragments Of Him*, for example, looks at how grief affects the life of your protagonist.

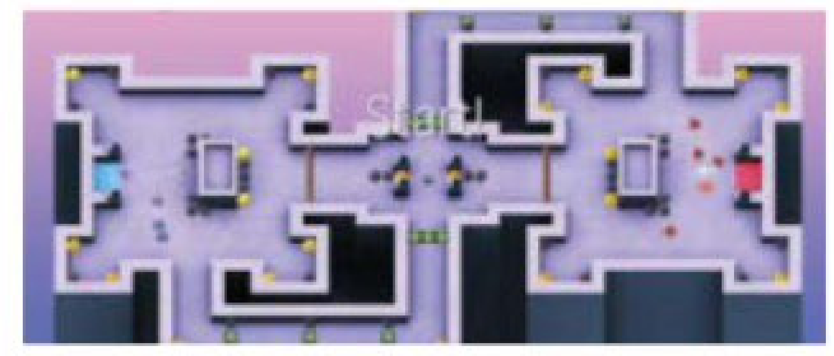
The indie scene is incredibly fluid in its development – do you believe that helps you keep relevant to market tastes as they evolve and change?
It's interesting and challenging to us to understand *exactly* how this variety of developers that we call 'indie' fits into the industry, right? And we've got to keep evolving and adapting to understand where it's going. The indie scene has changed so much over the last three years, we're not at the point where it's totally unrecognisable… and I *really* wish I knew where it was going, but we'll never know [laughs].

We don't know what developers will deliver next, we don't know what's going to be the next big trend – nobody could have predicted *Minecraft*, nobody could have predicted *Goat Simulator*. We need to keep moving, we need to keep getting better, because everything is moving so fast.



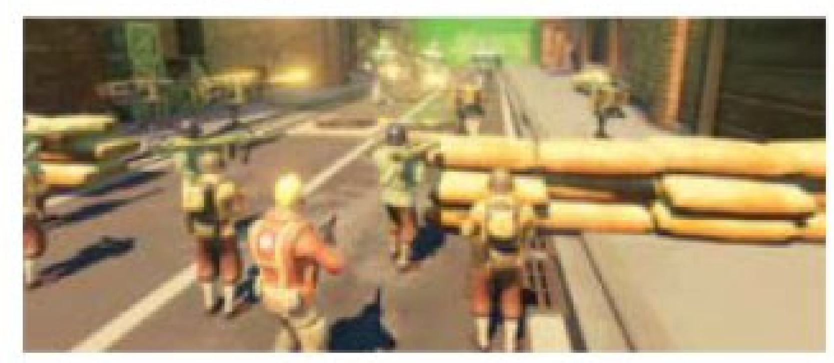
BEST IN SHOW

→ The ID@Xbox games that have piqued our attention the most…



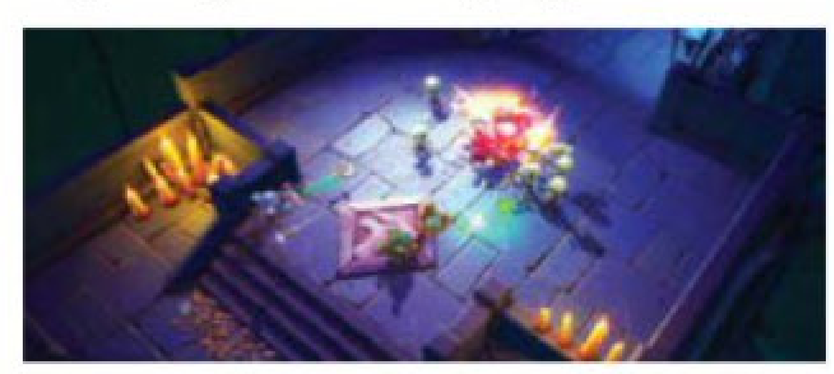
CLUSTERPUCK99 (PHL COLLECTIVE)
■ Reminiscent of *#IDARB*, this is a competitive sports game that can support up to eight players simultaneously.

EARTHLOCK: FESTIVAL OF MAGIC (SNOWCASTLE GAMES)
■ A non-linear role-playing game that celebrates all that's great about high-fantasy and RPG elements triple-A has recently ignored.



FORTIFIED (CLAPFOOT GAMES)
■ An action-strategy game that somehow manages to mix shoot-em-up, RTS and tower defence mechanics and not make a total mess of this crazy fusion.

PIXEL GALAXY (SERENITY FORGE)
■ A game that's not ashamed of its *Katamari Damacy* influences, this is a co-op shoot-em-up that relies on growing and working together.



SUPER DUNGEON BROS. (REACT! GAMES)
■ A co-op dungeon-crawler that's been given a satisfyingly metal soundtrack and almost infinite gameplay. Lots of fun with friends.

SWORDY (FROGSHARK)
■ A brawler that reminds us of *Gang Beasts* (in that it's physics-based and *ridiculous*), debuts on Xbox One.

→ ROCKET LEAGUE DEVELOPER WILL BE BRINGING THE GAME TO OTHER PLATFORMS AFTER ITS PS4 SUCCESS



> These days, it's all about spectacle, leaving the much-loved turn-based format to handheld devs and indies

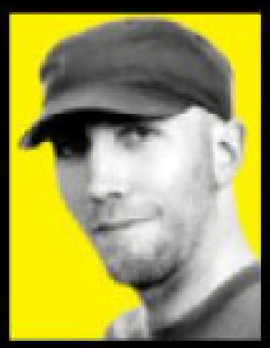
How the JRPG got its C-groove back

I find it genuinely amazing that we're this far into a new console generation without seeing a single half-decent JRPG. PS1 had *Suikoden* soon after launch, PS2 had several middling From Software games day one, while PS3 had *Enchanted ARMs* to tide fans over until developers could get their shit together. Yes, we've had *Omega Quintet*, but I specifically recall referencing 'half-decent' rather than 'indecent' games, and *Bloodborne* only fits the bill on a semantic level. Fact is, if you're looking for a classic turn-based, Japan-developed adventure in 2015, you're shit out of luck. But why is that?

The easy option would be to blame Square. Having popularised the format with *Final Fantasy VII* nearly two decades ago, the studio's decision to pursue more action-oriented combat systems with recent *FF* games could arguably have helped steer the genre in a new direction. These days, it's all about spectacle, leaving the much-loved turn-based format to handheld devs and indies, which I doubt the clever bastards at Zeboyd Games are crying about too much. Turn-based games like those so many of us know and love have no more of a place in mainstream popular culture than the Vengaboys or Tazos, apparently – it was a novelty at the time but one that quickly wore off for many, as much as a whole generation of PS2 imports may have tried to argue otherwise. Even the PS3 era had more than its fair share of 'traditional' JRPGs, but rising costs and slumping sales sure managed to highlight and dispel this anomaly for the most part.

For better or worse, action is where it's at today – *FFXV* is riffing off *Kingdom Hearts* with its combat, From Software has finally honed its craft in this regard and Omega Force would appear to be making games based on every property on the planet, with loose RPG mechanics forcing every franchise that stumbles into the house of Musou under this action-RPG banner. So where do fans of menus turn in this, their hour of need? Poetically, the song remains the same at ever – they turn to Square.

Dragon Quest XI is a thing now and while the best part is the bit where the 3DS version lets you play 2D and 3D RPGs *at the same time* (look it up, it's incredible), the PS4 version looks glorious too. Square is somehow playing both sides of the current scene by offering fans both the cool, easy mode option (*Dragon Quest Heroes*) and the riskier, more traditional fare (*XI*) under one umbrella; a smart solution and one that I really hope pans out well given how much I want to play both games. If it takes there being a *Dragon Quest Dynasty Warriors* game for me to get a new high-profile traditional RPG, then to hell with it – I'll bite the bullet and mash Square until I get my classic RPG experience back. Which, reading it back, might just be the most pathetic threat of all time. Oh well.



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and will do whatever it takes to get a Platinum Trophy for *Final Fantasy VII*

Import Watch

→ Yoru No Nai Kuni

No, it's not a secretly anagrammed *Ni No Kuni* sequel – this Gust action-RPG does have elements of the Level5/Ghibli collaboration but itself is a far more action-heavy twist on using monster minions in real-time RPG combat. While you only directly control the main character, it seems like minion abilities and attacks can be triggered at will, creating some dark and bizarre hybrid of *Devil May Cry* and *Deception* in how it plays out. Hopefully, it'll be as awesome as that sounds...


→ FUNDERS CAN SHARE GAME PROFITS ON NEW CROWDFUNDING SITE FIG, FOUNDED BY FORMER DOUBLE FINE COO



"One moment I'll always remember in my gamer career is being able to do that slide, first time, when my friends couldn't do it"

AGOSTINO SIMONETTA, EUROPEAN MANAGER, ID@XBOX



WHY I ♥...

SUPER MARIO 64

AGOSTINO SIMONETTA, EUROPEAN MANAGER, ID@XBOX

*“*Mario 64 *means a lot to me because, well, when I was growing up, I didn't have a Nintendo 64. I'm from Italy originally, and one of my friends over there used to own a bar, and he had this Nintendo 64 [hooked up] in there. One night, there were about five or six of us and he closed the bar for the evening, and we got to the slide in the winter level. At this point, I'd never tried playing a Nintendo 64 and I didn't know what to do with the controller... but I just* loved *it. One moment I'll always remember in my gamer career is that, being able to do that slide, first time, when my friends couldn't do it. But I'll give an honourable mention to the newest* Mario 3D *on 3DS, too, because that's the first game I've ever sat and finished with my daughter, playing together... well, it was more me playing and her watching, but you know what I mean [laughs].”*

Mafia III

CONCEPT ■ It's the Sixties and America is recovering from decades of war. The homefront – New Orleans, specifically – has been left unattended, and now it's your turn to rule the lands…

The death of the family

"*Mafia* is known for its stories… stories about *crime*," Andy Wilson, Hangar 13's executive producer tells us, shortly after the game's debut unveiling in Cologne, Germany. By this point we've seen protagonist Lincoln Clay in action – he's exactly what you'd expect from a *Mafia* protagonist: angry, dejected, with a violent disposition, but also somewhat charismatic and – in his own way – alluring. Obviously, he's on a revenge quest (he's just returning to New Orleans, where he was raised, after the Vietnam war), but that doesn't mean Hangar 13 wants to simply churn out the same gangster revenge plot that's been stuck in a feedback loop for years.

"The key tenets of *Mafia* are that it puts you in a city, it puts you in a time period and then you know exactly where you are: you're absorbed into this journey of one specific character," says Wilson. "That was the strength of where we wanted to work. Haden [Blackman], the creative director of the studio, his background is in writing: in his spare time he's *still* a comic book writer (on *Batwoman* for DC, at Marvel [with *Elektra*])… so the narrative basis of the game is really important to him. That was incorruptible in his mind."

And rightly so – by putting Clayton, a biracial protagonist, at the centre of a game set in the Sixties in southern America, Blackman has chosen to tackle some serious themes that most games tend to sidestep. "Narratively, we didn't just want to do the same thing again," explains Wilson when we asked him about why Hangar 13 chose this new setting, this new central cast. "We wanted to tell a new story and give it a new twist, so that's why we chose the Sixties setting – at that time of American history, there were all these new mob influences and all these new factions that were struggling for power. That's a more interesting time period, and that gave us slightly more narrative options to study."

Directly and maturely addressing the subject of race in games is still in its infancy – there have been precious few actual titles that pick apart and explore the subject matter with the agency and narrative weight of *serious* interactive fiction. We've seen metaphors for race-related issues touched upon (*Mass Effect*, *X-Men*, *Final Fantasy*), but never the actual *real-world* interpretations. Considering how the *Mafia* games are known for how 'raw' they can be – how they unflinchingly tackle everything from violence to, say, strict traffic rules – we're confident that *Mafia III*'s approach to racism (to being an active *victim* of racism) is going to be pretty on-the-knuckle. After all, the game is set in 1968 – not only have you got the sexual revolution rippling through the cities of America, you've also got national social reform, the Vietnam War and protests, and – of course – it was the year Martin Luther King was shot and killed.

/// "We're not shying away from the racial issues of the time," says Wilson. "We have the advantage of being a narratively-based game at our core, so we have plenty of time – through whatever measure; world, storytelling, one-on-one interactions – to tell the story. We made sure to get that *right* – there's a lot of research into [how the racial tensions] at the time worked, and we're *keenly* aware we can't mishandle that. But at the same time, we wanted to tell *this* story at *this* time, about *this* character in *this* city… so to have everything friendly and nice in this game? That would have been a real disservice."

We actually think that *Mafia III* might deliver on a promise that genre rival *GTA V* fell flat on – delivering a real, *actual* story. We're not going to criticise the writing of Rockstar's magnum opus – it was functional and totally suited to game's overall tone – but we're relying on *Mafia* to give something a little more substantial, something where we don't abhor all the characters in the game, something where the story has more to say than an attack on the culture that supports it.

"This will sound weird, but we had a very specific vision about what we wanted to do, and we're *not* a 'focus group' type studio – there's not a single point we've looked at



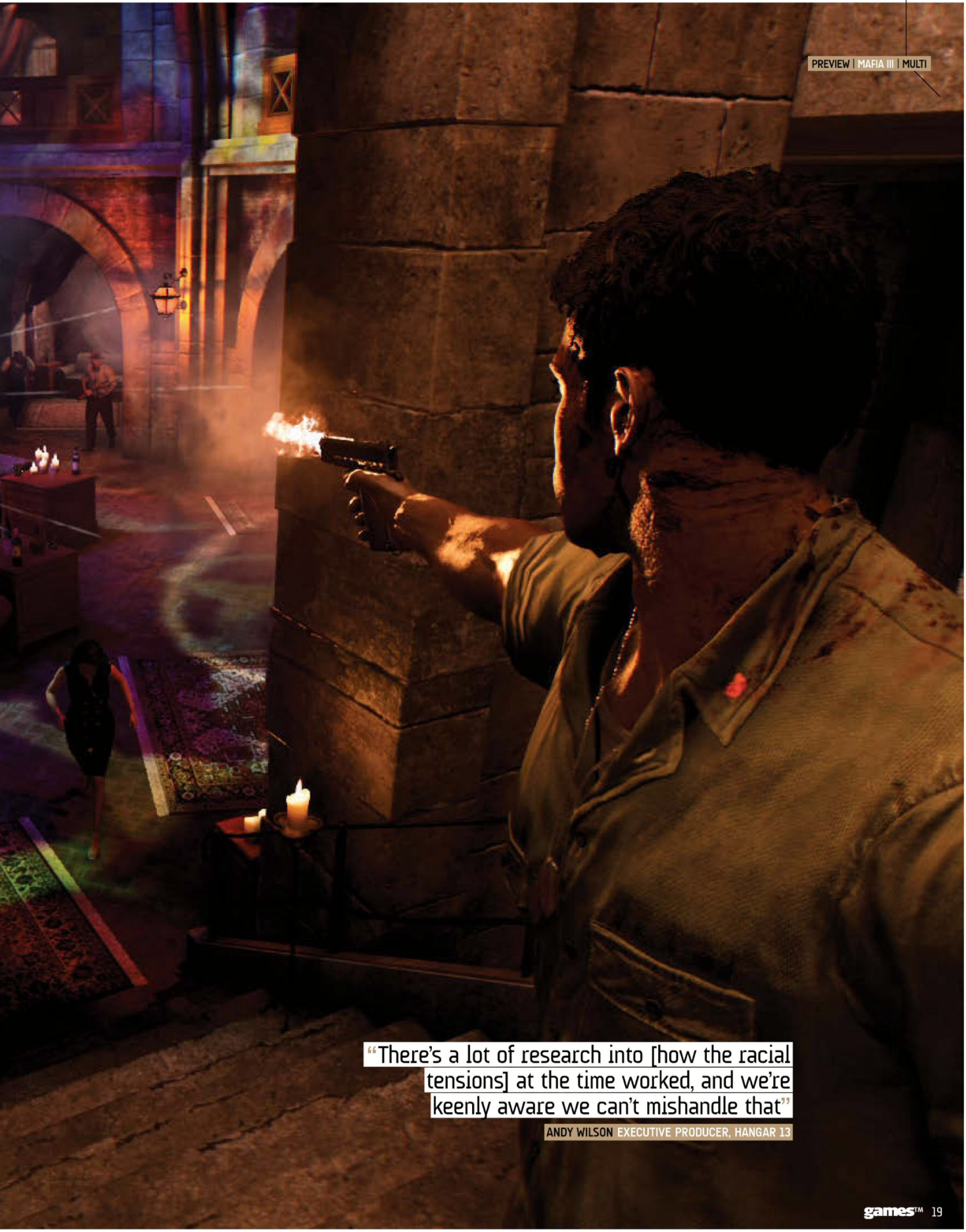
INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin:
USA
Publisher:
2K Games
Developer:
Hangar 13
Release:
2016
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Hangar 13 was set up specifically to work on *Mafia III*, and has already attracted a slew of triple-A talent from around the world. Headed up by writer Haden Blackman – who has the *Star Wars: Forced Unleashed* games under his belt – Hangar 13 is funded and directly affiliated by 2K Games. The studio is keen to prove its worth in the field of narrative, and prove there's still room in the industry for open-world gangster sandboxes, outside of Saints Row and GTA, anyway.



"There's a lot of research into [how the racial tensions] at the time worked, and we're keenly aware we can't mishandle that"

ANDY WILSON EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, HANGAR 13



anyone else's work and said 'So, what's everyone else doing?'" admits Wilson, bluntly. "We're very much focused on our own work, our own thing. What you've not seen from the demos so far is that strong narrative – that *linear* narrative – that's still very much part of the game."

/// The way the game's story is built operates on two vital keystones: characters and modular narrative elements. There is an expansive cast of characters that can each offer you special 'services'; from contacts in the police department that can keep the heat off your tail, to more aggressive gangsters that can lend you extra firepower.

"The way you get these 'services' is by rewarding the family with territories, so you have decisions about what you want to build in your arsenal, and to build what you want, you're going to have to manage the frictions between your characters – the way in which they will interact and respond to you is massively going to depend on how you've treated them." So, unlike the relationships you forge and 'maintain' in *GTA*, the way you decide to divvy out the goods and treat your partners in *Mafia* will actually impact the story.

"The narrative itself is quite organic; it's not a left/right branch, things builds over time. If you start neglecting one character, you're going to start having problems with that character and that's going to have consequences down the line. The other aspect is that each character has different tolerances for what you go out and do in the open world: some characters are much more resistant to you, say, killing cops. But the character that has the 'call off the cops' service, for example, is going to start tightening up what he's willing to give you or removing that option altogether after a while. There's all of these different ways the supporting characters come into play."

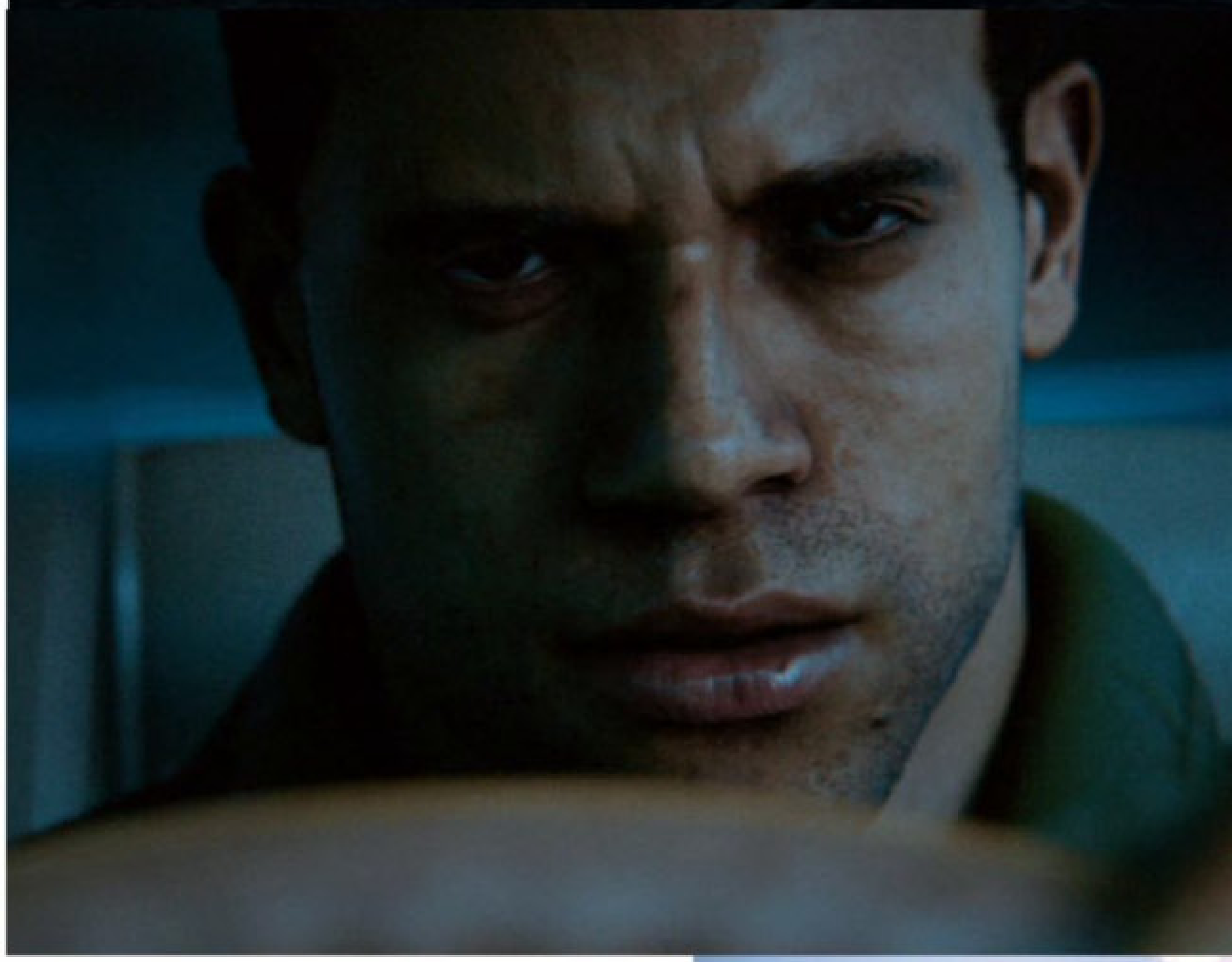
There's no on-screen gauge or bar to show you where your relationship with the supporting cast stands, instead Hangar 13 is relying on its proprietary engine (upgraded from *Mafia II*'s) to show you how upset your family is with you. The engine has been specifically tuned for this generation, meaning intimate details on character models can be used to express disdain or disgust at you, and the verbal tells they'll let off will also indicate their state of mind. "You'll start to get a feel for how upset they're getting, and managing that friction becomes really important. You can designate one hideout in an area to *one* character, multiple hideouts in an area to *another* character, and once you've liberated the whole district, give the district itself to *another* character. That's going to potentially upset the apple cart, but you'd get three better rewards for it. You've always got to manage that balance."

/// It seems everyone in New Orleans is motivated by self-preservation and self-interest: you, as the head of this upcoming family, want to make sure your newly acquired rackets are being adequately managed. The missions aren't easy in *Mafia III*, either: we played a level where we had to invade an enemy faction's jazz club and take down a high-ranking mobster. Without the aid of our comrades, we'd have been bleeding out long before the mission was over; their skills are that valuable. But each of your underlings wants something for themselves too and loyalty, it seems, doesn't come cheap…

"These characters [you'll meet] have all existed in the city, they're used to how things have been, but they were all very subservient to [the previous mob boss], so they're only joining you because they feel like they've got the opportunity to get in on a bigger slice of the pie." A little back story here: Clayton's return from 'Nam saw him come back to a city where his family – rulers of the criminal underworld at the time – have been ousted by the Italian mafia. You're on a quest to avenge them, but also take the city back into your own hands.

"In the 20 or so years since the previous game, [*Mafia II* protagonist] Vito has ended up [in New Orleans] and he's really not in the best of places – and *he* wants a bigger slice of the pie again, so he's in it for selfish reasons, and that makes the whole game rest on these really uneasy alliances." Everything seems to knit together rather wonderfully in *Mafia III*; the narrative side of things seems more involved than just a lazy script underpinning the whole game, the action and the physics behind it all feel more complete than sandbox-'em-up rival *Saints Row*, and the character development seems more in line with gumshoe fiction and noir-style graphic narratives than it does with other videogames. To us, that's what makes this one of the more exciting games to keep an eye on in 2016 and what has made *Mafia* stand out in recent years.

> "If you start neglecting one character, you're going to start having problems with them"
>
> **ANDY WILSON** EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, HANGAR 13



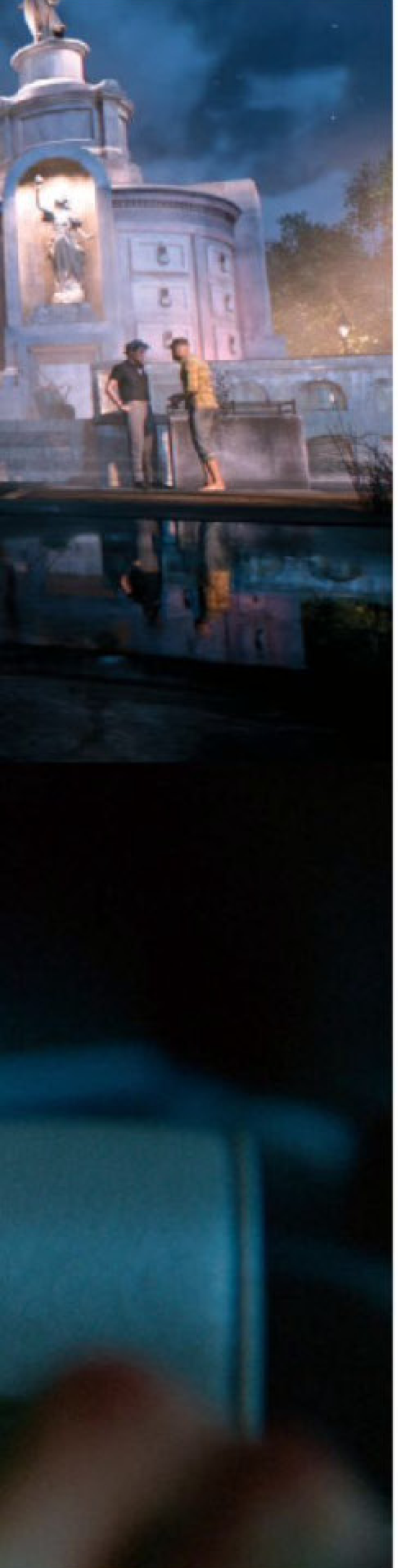
Above: We look forward to seeing how Hangar 13 fleshes out Clayton himself – will there be any redeeming features behind the merciless killer you play as?



Right: Wilson used to work at Ubisoft Toronto on racing games – it seems that experience has been applied to the physics underpinning *Mafia III*'s vehicle handling.



Above: Apparently, 2K is going to announce more about 'the cinematic side of the game' soon… can we expect real cutscenes in this day in age? We hope so for this one.



A MEETING OF THE MINDS

HANGAR 13 WAS founded specifically to design the new instalment of 2K's property. "We wanted to take advantage of the amount of talent out there, and 2K wanted to invest in this new studio," says Wilson. "Conversations started with Haden [Blackman] (employee number one in the studio) about what kind of project we should work on. It was then the decision to start work on the *Mafia* franchise was made. I came from Ubisoft Toronto, and it was a similar situation back there: when you're starting a new studio up, you want to give them an established franchise to work with, because you don't have the *massive* problem of getting new IP out there. [Existing IP] also attracts people… and [*Mafia*] has allowed us to build a pretty big and experienced team!"











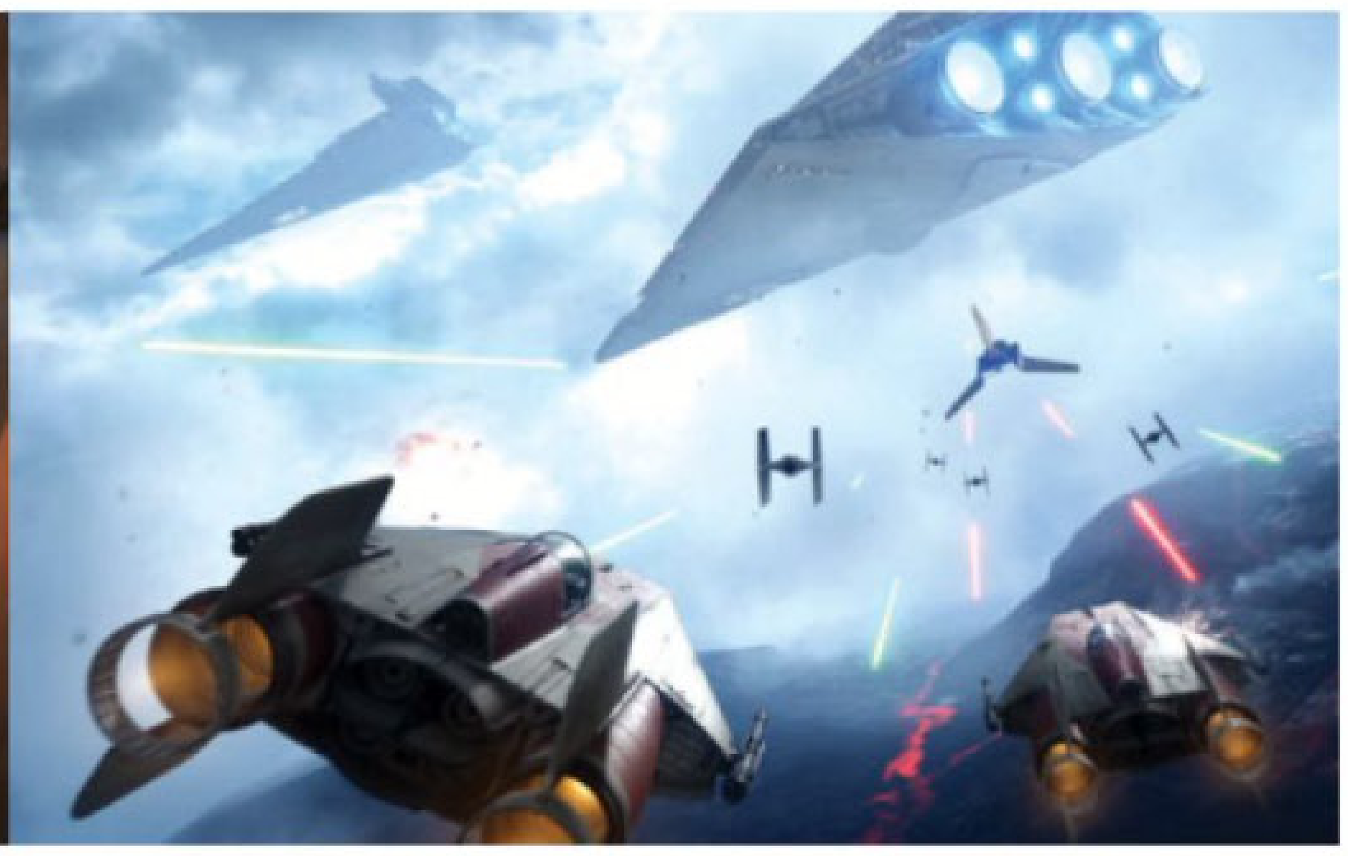
FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

A LOT OF open-world games fall down on their combat or their driving, but Hangar 13 wants to make sure neither criticism can be levelled at *Mafia III*. "You're controlling this character all of the time, so if it feels like crap to actually go into combat – whether that's in a vehicle, from behind cover, in close quarters or anything else – then this experience is just ruined," Wilson says. "We really wanted to make sure the whole thing felt fluid and natural – there's been, like, a two-year focus on melee, making sure that feels tight and proper. Everyone's brought their own experience from [the studios they've come from]. Some of them have worked on games with a much larger combat focus, so we're getting those skillsets."



Both the X-Wing and TIE Fighters handled quite similarly during our play-through, with the only noticeable difference between both crafts being the ship-specific special abilities: TIE fighters feature a speed boost and X-Wings a limited shield.





COMMAND & CONQUER

DICE LIFTED THE lid on Supremacy, where the goal is to gain control of five points across the game's largest maps. While it sounds like the *Battlefield* Conquest Mode, DICE is looking to ensure that teamwork is encouraged. "You will always spawn close to the action when you enter Supremacy, so you'll never feel isolated from the fight," explains lead level designer, Dennis Brännvall. "By focusing on one key point at a time, players not playing the objective and camping on a hill somewhere will be a rare sight." Expect gameplay footage and more info on the remaining modes – Drop Zone and Cargo – to drop soon.



Right: Players can pilot the game's Hero Ships (Millennium Falcon, Slave I) in Fighter Squadron mode only if they've managed to fly down close to the planet's surface and nab the special power up that's waiting down below for them.





Star Wars: Battlefront

CONCEPT ■ DICE's take on the classic multiplayer series sees the Swedish studio elevate its coding skills to the heights with epic battles culled from the original trilogy and beyond

games™ takes to the skies in a galaxy far, far away

Let's face it, no matter what we, or anyone else says or thinks of EA and DICE's spin on the *Star Wars* saga, you're going to buy it. Everyone is. There's absolutely no doubt in our mind that sales on this hugely anticipated Christmas release are going to be through the roof. Thankfully, we've played it, and can report back that the game is in fact pretty damn good, but still has some way to go before it hits shelves during the yuletide season, and attempts to steal *Call Of Duty*'s multiplayer crown from underneath its nose.

Not content with nabbing the coveted Game of Show at this year's gamescom, *Battlefront* also pulled back the curtain on a new mode called Fighter Squadron. Essentially it's a vehicle only multiplayer mode that pits the Rebel Forces against the might of the Imperial Empire. If you play as the Rebels the goal is to hunt down and obliterate an Imperial transport shuttle, whereas if you slip into cockpit of an TIE-Fighter for the Imperial Empire, you're tasked with protecting the shuttle and battling it out in a series of bombastic dogfights over the likes of the planet Sullust. Oh, and while there are X-Wings at play here, you'll also get the chance to pilot A-Wings, TIE Interceptors, Boba Fett's cunningly crafted Slave I ship and – here it comes – the *Star Wars* series' most iconic space faring craft, the Millennium Falcon.

That in itself is worth the price of admission alone, right? Ultimately it's not enough because even after show-stopping unveils at both E3 and gamescom, there are still hardened Force fans out there balking at the fact DICE has opted not to include a story campaign or the *Star Wars* signature mode, Galactic Conquest. While it is disappointing that a campaign mode has been eschewed, it's been done in a bid to ensure that the modes that *are* in the game are completely focused on delivering the best possible *Star Wars* experience. Still, there is no doubt in our mind that a narrative-based campaign will find its way into the inevitable sequel a few years from now.

/// Fighter Squadron features ten human players on either sides of the conflict, each faction bolstered by ten AI-controlled BOTS, bringing the total number of ships in the air to a pretty meaty 40. Taking out human-controlled players rewards you with three times the amount of points you'd nab from an AI craft takedown, and while we only got the chance to pilot X-Wings and TIE-Fighters in the demo, we're told that the other teased sky brawlers seen in the trailer, will be woven into the code in the not too distant future.

> "The previous Battlefront games – they didn't really have campaigns… That's what we wanted to do. We wanted to focus on the multiplayer"
> SIGURLINA INGVARSDOTTIR DICE

Both ships control similarly, with each one equipped with blasters and homing missiles, while evasive moves for dodging fire are key to mastering if you want to avoid being blown to smithereens. In fact, both ships played very similarly with the exception being each one's special move: X-Wings come equipped with short-lived shield, while TIE-Fighters can blast through the skies with the help of a nifty speed boost that's perfect for playing catch-up if you find yourself trailing behind in a battle.

Unlike foot soldiers in *Star Wars: Battlefront*, the ships can't be upgraded, despite the promise of aerial wins being added to your overall player/character progression. As for the aforementioned Hero Ships, like the Millennium Falcon, these will join the fight if you're quick to find the special power-ups that spawn near the planet's surface during each round. While we didn't spot any demo-busting bugs throughout our play-through, we did find the overall gameplay more than a little disorientating, and with the action moving so fast high up in the skies, it took more than a few attempts to get to grips with the frenetic gameplay style. Still, there's plenty of time for fine-tuning with *Battlefront* still currently in alpha and the all-important release date a couple of months away.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: DICE
Release: 20 November 2015
Players: 1-40

Developer Profile

DICE was founded back in 1992 in Sweden, where the team cut its teeth in development coding pinball games for the Amiga. The big break came with *Battlefield 1942*, before the company was snapped up by EA where it went on to develop countless *Battlefield* sequels and spin-offs.

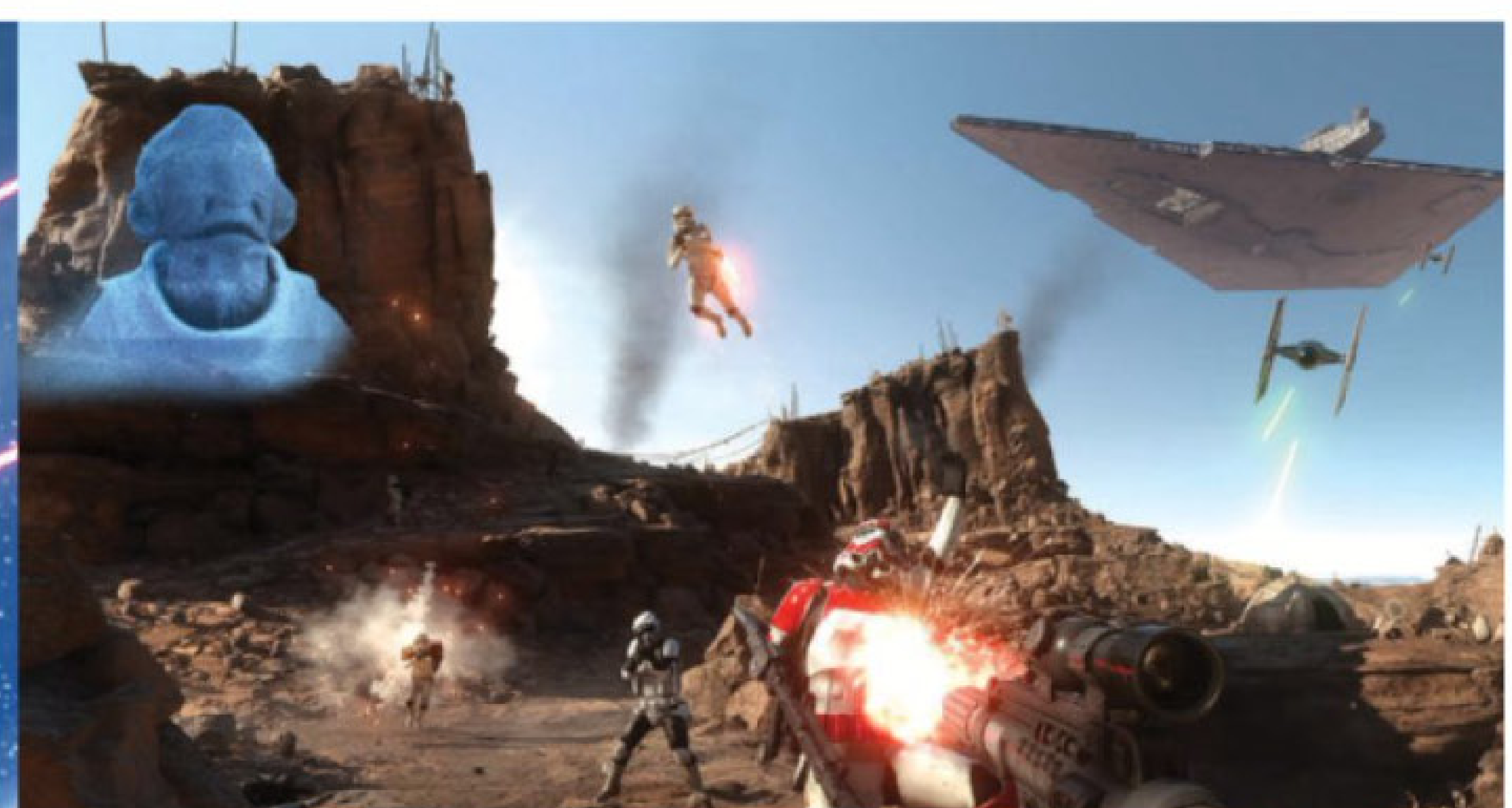
Developer History

Battlefield Hardline **2015 [Multi]**
Battlefield 4 **2013 [Multi]**
Mirror's Edge **2008 [Multi]**

High Point

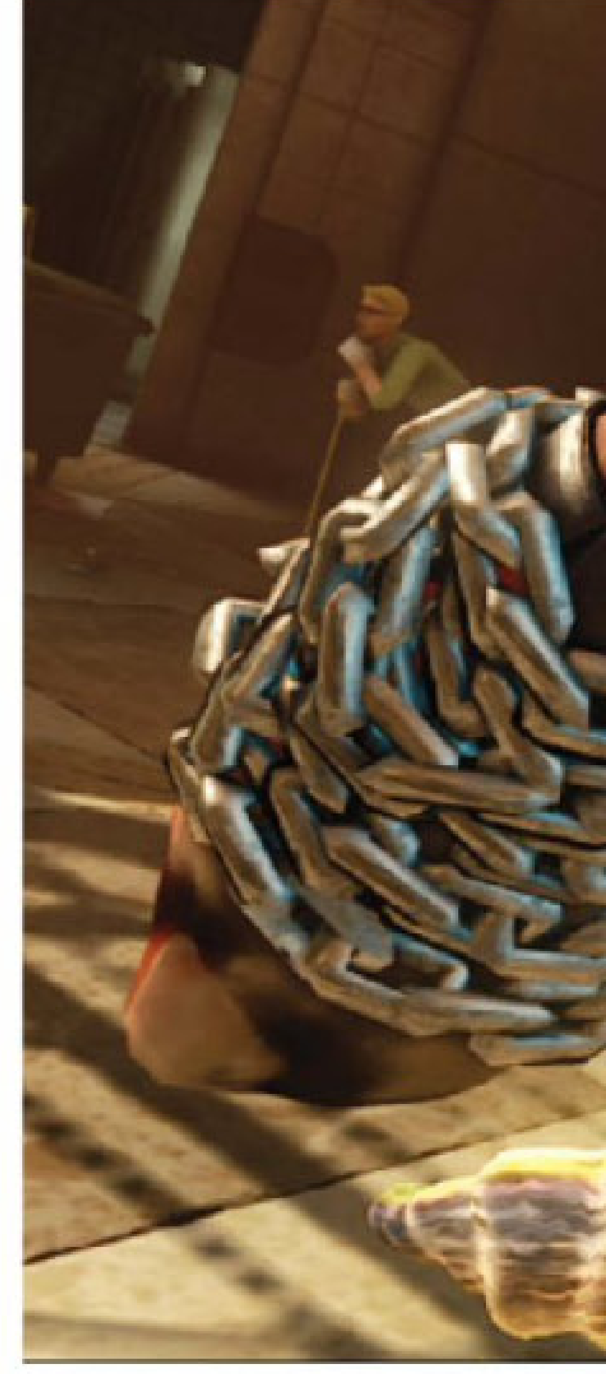
While the studio's money-making lies in the *Battlefield* series, *Mirror's Edge* was a game that broadened both DICE's and EA's horizons with its riveting gameplay.





■ Left: Blast Mode hasn't been revealed publicly yet, and there are still three other modes yet to be unveiled before release: Supremacy, Drop Zone and Cargo.







Street Fighter V

CONCEPT ■ Fighters from all around the world take to the streets once more as M. Bison and Shadaloo plot more dastardly schemes in the shadow of some unknown terror

Let its beauty intoxicate you!

The basic way *Street Fighter V* plays will be immediately familiar to anyone that picked up a stick (or a pad) and went for a few rounds on *Street Fighter IV.* The standard six-button system remains in place – jab, strong, fierce punches and short, forward and roundhouse kicks – with low and high blocks working the same way as before. There's no air-blocking, though, a la the *Alpha* series (which it seems *Street Fighter V* is spiritually riffing on), and the dash mechanic makes a return, too. That's pretty much where the similarities end, though – *Street Fighter V* does away with the cornerstones of its predecessor's design and introduces some new tricks of its own.

If that doesn't get you excited, the game has also radically re-jigged its graphics, moving away from the awkward half-cartoon of *Street Fighter IV* into a much more stylised direction that looks *stunning* in motion at 60 frames per second. Some odd character redesigns aside (looking at you, Ken), the game is looking like the perfect sequel.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: Q1 2016
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Responsible for every *Street Fighter* iteration so far (including the ill-fated *Street Fighter X Tekken*), Capcom continues to treat the series with the respect it deserves – changing enough with each iteration to keep it relevant.

Developer History

Dead Rising 3
2013 [Xbox One]
Lost Planet 3
2013 [Multi]
Resident Evil 6
2012 [Multi]

High Point

Street Fighter IV, in its many iterations, proved that Capcom was keen to listen and respond to fan feedback, bringing in some expected (and some surprising!) additions to the roster.

1 'FOCUS' AND 'ULTRA' ATTACKS ARE GONE…

THE MAIN ADDITIONS to *Street Fighter IV*'s system lay in the 'Focus' and 'Ultra' systems… both of these have been scrapped. And we think that's for the best. Focus Attacks were an interesting addition, but they totally ruined the usability of some characters entirely. Vega, for example, who's just been re-announced for *Street Fighter V*, was an unusable choice because his aerial combos could be easily anticipated and ruined by a well-timed 'Focus'. Ultras, too, were more style than substance – if you've got a full bar of meter, just give us a Super and forget about making the whole power-attack thing so contrived. It also means the characters are more predictable for pro-level match-ups.

3



4



5



"Many more new and returning characters will be added to the diverse roster, offering a wide variety of fighting styles for players to choose from"

PRESS RELEASE CAPCOM

2 ...AND THEY'RE REPLACED WITH THE V-SYSTEM

REPLACING THE 'FOCUS' and 'Ultra' gaps in *Street Fighter V*'s set-up is the V-System. This new game-wide rejig is introduced in the way of three meters; the Stun Gauge, the EX-gauge and the V-Trigger. The Stun Gauge is a visual representation of how much consecutive damage a character has taken – top it off, and you'll leave the enemy in a vulnerable 'dizzy' state. The EX-Gauge is the new game's way of measuring special move juice, ending in a Critical Art (read: Super). Finally, the V-Trigger fills when you take damage and gives each character a *very* different ability when activated - and they all look pleasantly different, to boot.

3 EACH CHARACTER FEELS AS INDIVIDUAL AS THEY SHOULD...

THERE ARE NO palette swaps here. Every character announced so far plays so differently from the one before that you'll have to learn each fighter's playstyle individually: you won't just be able to apply Cammy's specials to, say, Bison and expect them to work. Further to that, each character's unique V-Skill means they'll work better under certain pressures: Bison absorbs and repels projectiles, Birdie can give himself unique buffs, and Vega can toss out a rose that staggers the opponent, setting them up for one of his long-range aerial combos. Ken gets a little run that allows him to run-cancel, setting up for crazy combos.

4 ...AND EVEN HAVE THEIR OWN SPECIAL 'STATES'

IF YOU ABUSE the V-Skills enough – as well as taking the required amount of damage over a match – you'll be able to activate the V-Trigger: an input that'll put your character into a special state which varies depending on who you've chosen. Ryu's trigger buffs his projectile speed and damage, for example, whilst Bison's turns his dash into a teleport and makes him immune to projectiles. Cammy's trigger seems to speed her entire moveset up *significantly* and it appears that Vega's trigger gives him better range on his aerial moves – so he can set-up those high combos more easily. That anti-aerial game from *Street Fighter IV* is *gone*.

5 IT'S GENERALLY MORE GEARED TOWARDS DRAMATIC COMEBACKS

THE ULTRA SYSTEM in the previous game was a bit... clumsy... it let players totally reverse a game if they'd been pressured for the entire match. *Street Fighter V* (and the way it makes you flow from V-Skills into Critical Arts into V-Triggers) relies a lot more on subtlety and pace: you can't win a bad game back with *just* a Critical Art, but it'll be the start of a tactical campaign to start wearing your opponent down, if you trigger at the right time and pepper your moveset with V-Skills. It's a more intricate affair that *Street Fighter IV*, and we're happy with that. Considering links are easier to pull off, too, this is a more accessible game all over.



Quantum Break

CONCEPT ■ The timey-wimey shooter that's arguably the Xbox One's biggest exclusive ticks closer to release – but can its ambitious plans to redefine interactive narrative be counted on?

New cast, new gameplay, same concerns

Despite being one of the earliest exclusive titles announced for Xbox One, Remedy's *Quantum Break* has remained mysterious. Little was revealed when it was originally unveiled back in 2013, other than it being centred on time travel and having the ambitious goal of incorporating a TV show into the game's narrative, one that would change according to your actions. Fast-forward to now, time-hopping over a long period of silence and two major delays and… well, we still didn't really know a great deal about it, bar a newly confirmed release date of 5 April 2016. But this year's gamescom saw *Quantum Break* thrust back into the public consciousness, with creative director Sam Lake taking to the stage during Microsoft's press conference to deliver a long overdue showcase.

Lake was joined on stage by actor Shawn Ashmore, who lends his likeness and performance to the role of the game's chief protagonist: Jack Joyce. *Quantum Break* is in many ways a tale of brothers. Jack's brother William was killed in a time travel experiment gone wrong, but the same tragedy endows Jack, his friend Paul Serene, and female lead Beth Wilder with different time-based powers – and there's no love lost between the two, from what we've seen.

Although Beth's powers haven't been revealed, Jack gains the ability to freeze time or bring people out of "time stutters", while Serene becomes precognitive, able to perceive multiple possible timelines and then manipulate events in the present to achieve his chosen goal. *Quantum Break* is centred on choice, with the three central characters ultimately trying to shape the future – or in Jack's case, possibly a drive to change the past and save his brother. Oh, and probably fixing the minor inconvenience of time itself deteriorating, causing the abnormal stutters.

The structure of *Quantum Break* could be its most interesting point, though. The game will be split into five chapters, with the TV episodes taking place in between them. They're intended to be more than glorified, over-produced cutscenes – each is integral to the overall story. The rough split is that playable sections follow Joyce and Wilder, with Serene and his machinations taking the spotlight for the show. But don't expect a clean break – scenes may be experienced from both parties' perspectives, and characters will cross between the two media. While Lake has confirmed each instalment of the show will be roughly 22 minutes long, there's no indication of how long the game sections will be.

/// The idea of a fluid TV show where the narrative alters with decisions made in-game is exciting, potentially offering a brand new way to present stories to the audience and promising incredible incentive for multiple playthroughs to see all the variations of how the timeline can be affected. But here's the thing – *Quantum Break*, as a game, looks like *Max Payne* with its bullet time mechanic evolved into a pause function.

Most of what Remedy has shown so far focuses on Joyce taking out Monarch Corporation goons – Serene's shady megacorp – using a variety of time-warping techniques. Some of these extend to environmental takedowns, setting frozen cars up to act as ersatz bullets when normal temporal flow is restored, for instance. Aside from that, Jack's abilities seem to offer chronal-fuelled twists on skills we've all played dozens of times before. Speeding up his time flow? Dash attack. Time bubbles? Shields. Even freezing time looks little different to games that allow you to toy with gravity. In between all that, there's lots of cover based shooting, often damaging enemies' protective armour to render them vulnerable to Jack's talents.

> "Quantum Break brings a new twist to time-travel stories, both aesthetically and plot-wise"
>
> PRESS RELEASE REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

There's an almost ridiculous amount of potential inherent in *Quantum Break*'s premise and execution. But however impressive the production techniques of the digital show are, however engaging the performances from Ashmore et al, if the gameplay can't innovate beyond being yet another duck-and-cover third-person shooter, this may not have a future.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Finland
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Remedy Entertainment
Release: 5 April 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Quantum Break is written, directed and produced by Sam Lake, a creator among that rarified breed synonymous with a specific developer. Having penned all of Remedy's major titles and become creative director, he even lent oversight to Rockstar's *Max Payne 3*. Lake is a pseudonym though – his birth name is Sami Järvi, which, err, means "lake".

Developer History

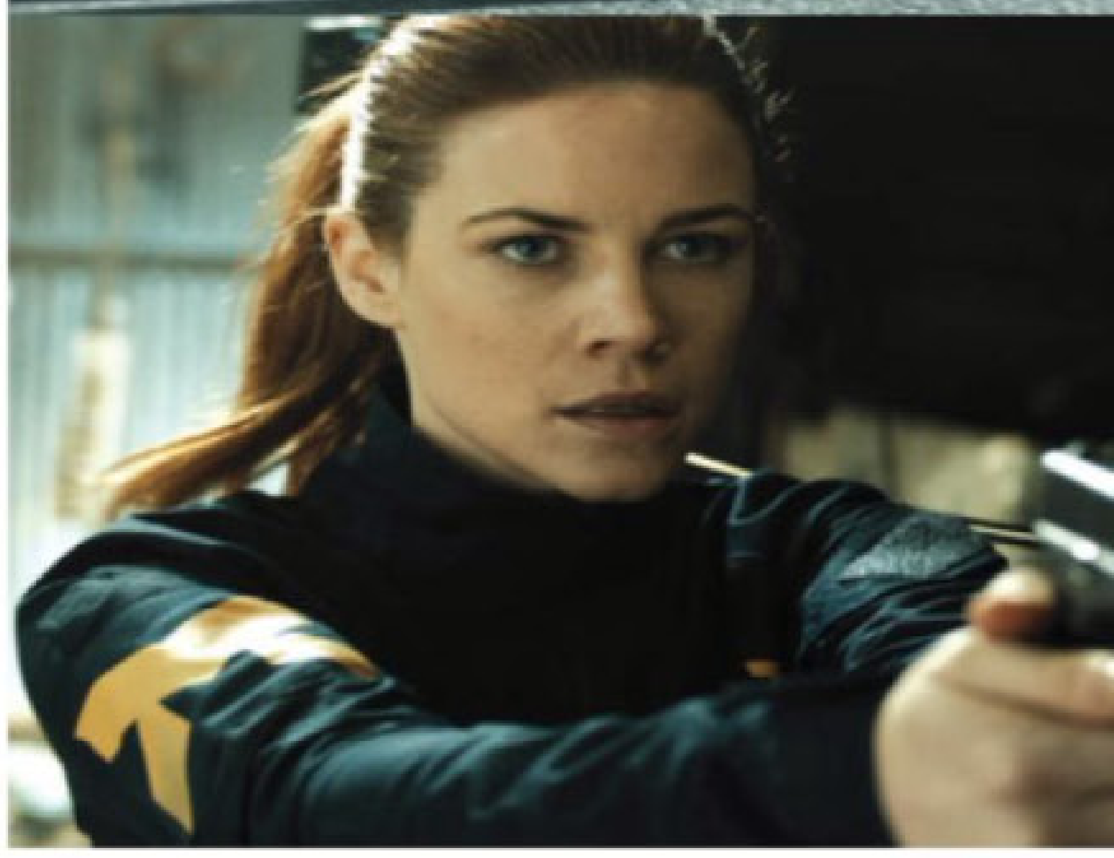
Max Payne
2001 [Multi]
Max Payne 2
2003 [Multi]
Alan Wake
2010 [Multi]
Alan Wake's American Nightmare
2012 [Multi]

High Point

While *Alan Wake* is an easy pick for a career high to date, *Quantum Break* stands to be Lake's crowning achievement – a rare example of a game being a singular creative vision.







■ Right: At least Littlefinger isn't likely to do terrible things to Sansa Stark during the course of *Quantum Break*. Well, we hope.



AUDITION TIME

QUANTUM BREAK'S AMBITION extends to its casting choices, which features a veritable who's who of pop-culture friendly actors. Besides Shawn "Iceman" Ashmore, the game sees *Lord Of The Rings*' Dominic Monaghan as Will Joyce, *Game Of Thrones*' Aiden Gillen as Serene, *Lost*'s Lance Reddick as Serene's right hand man Martin Hatch, and *True Blood*'s Amelia Rose Blaire. That's just scratching the surface too – Remedy has assembled a cast well versed in high-concept, genre-savvy work, which hopefully bodes well for the game's sci-fi trappings. If nothing else, memories of *Night Trap* being the epitome of live action sequences in games can shortly be consigned to the distant, nightmarish past.







Above: Trapping enemies in time bubbles is Jack's go-to move. Some have armour allowing them to move freely though, requiring different tactics. Below: There's no arguing that this looks great, but will *Quantum Break*'s gameplay actually be able to deliver something as innovative as its big ideas surrounding storytelling? Remedy needs to evolve beyond familiar shooter mechanics to really impress a new generation of players.









"Master accessible but deep 'stylish action' gameplay. Fluidly chain attacks with your dragon to create devastating combos to unleash upon your foes"
SCALEBOUND WEBSITE

Scalebound

CONCEPT ■ Drew – a plucky 20-something guy – has been dragged into the world of Draconis, and his only hope of leaving is *his own bloody dragon*

Dragon May Cry?

S*calebound*'s director, Hideki Kamiya, was introduced to dragons while in Japanese high school, where he bought his first gaming PC. Kamiya has been thinking a lot about dragons since then, lamenting their appearance as enemies in every game, concerned at their presentation as more powerful than beautiful. What the outspoken creator is trying to do in *Scalebound* is make the player appreciate just how terrifying *and* inspiring a dragon can be.

The main character, Drew – who looks like *Devil May Cry*'s Dante in a new costume – has a dragon at his side throughout the whole game. He's a companion and ally to be used in battle. This means the game will rely on AI mechanics and a whole new co-operative system that's fairly new for Platinum – the studio has primarily been focused on single-player only combo-based action.

So, Platinum is creating its first action-RPG, a game that intends to bring all the strengths of the studio into the open-world genre. The studio is leaving behind its so-far-so-good reliance on linear story progression, and those huge set-pieces triggered at certain points in the levels, replacing all that with Thuban, your dragon. So it's swings and roundabouts, right?



■ The colourful art style that *Scalebound* is being made with reminds us of the old era of *Final Fantasy* games.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Microsoft Studios
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: Q4 2016
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Founded in 2006 by gaming luminaries Shinji Mikami, Atsushi Inaba and Hideki Kamiya, Platinum Games was the natural progression of Capcom's Clover Studio, and has been the crux of neo-Japanese development for the last two generations.

Developer History

Bayonetta
PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U [2009]
Vanquish
PS3, Xbox 360 [2010]
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance
PS3, Xbox 360, PC [2013]

High Point

Bayonetta continued down the path Capcom's *Devil May Cry* started on, but did it in a more action-packed, fluid and well-animated way.

Thuban isn't directly controlled by you, but you command him to do certain actions, and he may or may not listen. Strangely enough, the game puts us in mind more of *Digimon World* on the PlayStation than anything else – those loose commands and divisible inputs haven't really been touched upon in an open-world RPG setting since then.

Thuban is the last dragon in the strange land of Draconis, and Drew doesn't belong there. He looks like he's been sucked into this land from modern Tokyo. Kamiya hopes that this sense of isolation will bond the two entities, and their relationship is the beating heart of *Scalebound*: if Drew dies, Thuban dies, and vice-versa. Drew has inherited some dragon powers of his own – he has a scaled arm (*Nero's Devil Bringer*, anyone?) so can transform into a powerful humanoid/dragon form from time to time – a little bit like Dante's *Devil Trigger*.

But to say that would be derivative. Yes, *Scalebound* has elements of past Platinum games in its DNA, but it's shaping up to be a very different project. We were concerned when we saw the loose way the characters handled and the damaged counter numbers popping up above enemies' heads, but can see the appeal. *Scalebound* seems to celebrate this new wave of action-JRPGs, positioning itself between *Final Fantasy XV*, *Xenoblade Chronicles*, *Monster Hunter* and *Devil May Cry*. And, more importantly, it's filling a very big gap on the Xbox One as an exclusive, to boot. We trust Platinum, and we trust Kamiya. *Scalebound* is going to be good.





As your cities attract more workers, they'll expand naturally on their own. Pestering from your citizens about where to put which building is almost non-existent – though you will have to decide which industries and businesses to develop.



Though it might be tempting, your goal is not to raze enemy towns, but rather to subjugate them through force or diplomacy.

TIME TEAM

EXPANSION IN *GRAND Ages* is a mixture of allying with existing towns and founding your own with settlers. The latter option gave us the most unexpected, nerdiest thrill. As Dumont's frontiersmen schlepped their building supplies into a clearing, the game suggested a name for the new settlement. How? According to Dumont, the development team got old maps and plotted every town that ever existed in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. So, if your settlers follow the Thames from the east coast of England to found a town, the game will suggest the name 'London'.





Grand Ages: Medieval

CONCEPT ■ An expansive empire-building sim in which diplomacy, trade and just a touch of siegework provide the keys to Europe and North Africa

Laying siege to the console castle

It's perhaps not the sexiest impression to take from a preview, but what impressed us most about *Grand Ages: Medieval* was how its developer, Gaming Minds, has managed to take something so outwardly complicated and make it so apparently simple. In the hour we spent being talked through our hands-off demo by creative director Daniel Dumont, we watched from a god's-eye-view as settlers, trade caravans and soldiers by the hundred scurried across the crisscrossed roads of late game Europe, peddling wares and besieging towns seemingly completely under their own steam. Sometimes Dumont would zoom in to show us something, like what was in the back of a trundling trade cart, but for the most part, *Grand Ages*' populace seemed like model citizens. By this we mean they weren't pestering us.

The reason for the streamlining is clear: in the latter stages of this expansive empire sim – in which Dumont is controlling dozens of towns, cities and trade routes – fussing over each one like an interfering council jobsworth would be completely overwhelming. While Dumont is hands-on with his people in his first settlement – choosing a site for a new town based on the abundance of nearby resources and proximity to other established, neutral trading partners – once his empire stretches from the shores of Britain to those of North Africa, the robots take over to maintain order.

And while it may be that we've only been around the game for a short time (or that Dumont really knows what he's doing), the orderly nature of *Grand Ages* appealed to the benevolent dictators in us. Where many other RTS games (and console RTS in particular) put a strong emphasis on building up a mighty host and steamrolling over someone else's, *Grand Ages* seems less about wanton destruction and more about bringing Europe and the top tip of Africa round to your way of thinking (through trade, diplomacy or sieges).

/// So, if you opt to raise the banners and march off to conquer an enemy settlement, you'll have to muster a siege force. But here's the thing: because soldiers in *Grand Ages* require food (you know, like real soldiers do), it's bad practice to have them just sitting about in towns when there isn't a war on. So, you need to spread your troops across your empire and bring them together when you need them to go and sack something. All this takes time. Finally, once you manoeuvre your army into position, nothing gets set on fire – the AI takes your army, pits it against the defenders' army, and the winner gets the town. As warfare goes, it's quite peaceful, actually.

> "We'll have maybe 100 towns, several borders, several different AI opponents… so, we must reduce micromanagement"
>
> **DANIEL DUMONT** CREATIVE DIRECTOR, GAMING MINDS

This isn't to say that *Grand Ages* looks easy. Games under the standard starting conditions are protracted affairs (although you can customise a whole host of options, like starting wealth, AI competence, frequency of natural disasters and so on to create bespoke difficulty settings), and though your enemies all start at the same level as you with just a single settlement, they'll be working tirelessly under the fog of war to ally themselves with (or capture) their own towns, until you eventually bump into each other somewhere in the middle. Again, the goal (under normal conditions) isn't total annihilation of all who dare oppose you, but to amass a certain number of in-game victory points by researching new technologies and expanding your rule the furthest.

The illusion of ease that Dumont demonstrated with *Grand Ages* might dissolve when we first get our hands on it (there was a brief allusion to the kinds of supply-and-demand snowballing disasters that can occur among closely connected towns – one coastal village stops producing salt, the next can't cure its meat, the next can't feed its soldiers, and suddenly it's famine and desertion all round). But, from what we've seen, *Grand Ages* is a smart RTS with a depth of easily interlocking systems that – perhaps most importantly – bode well for a potentially fiddlier console port.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Kalypso Media
Developer: Gaming Minds
Release: 25 September 2015
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Though the name Gaming Minds might have you scratching impotently at the bottom of your brain barrel, the German team has actually been turning out PC strategy games since 1992. *Grand Ages*, however, is the studio's first game to be simultaneously developed for PC and console.

Developer History

Rise of Venice
2013 [PC]
Port Royale 3
2012 [PC, Xbox 360, PS3]
Patrician IV
2010 [PC]
Dark Star One
2006 [PC, Xbox 360]

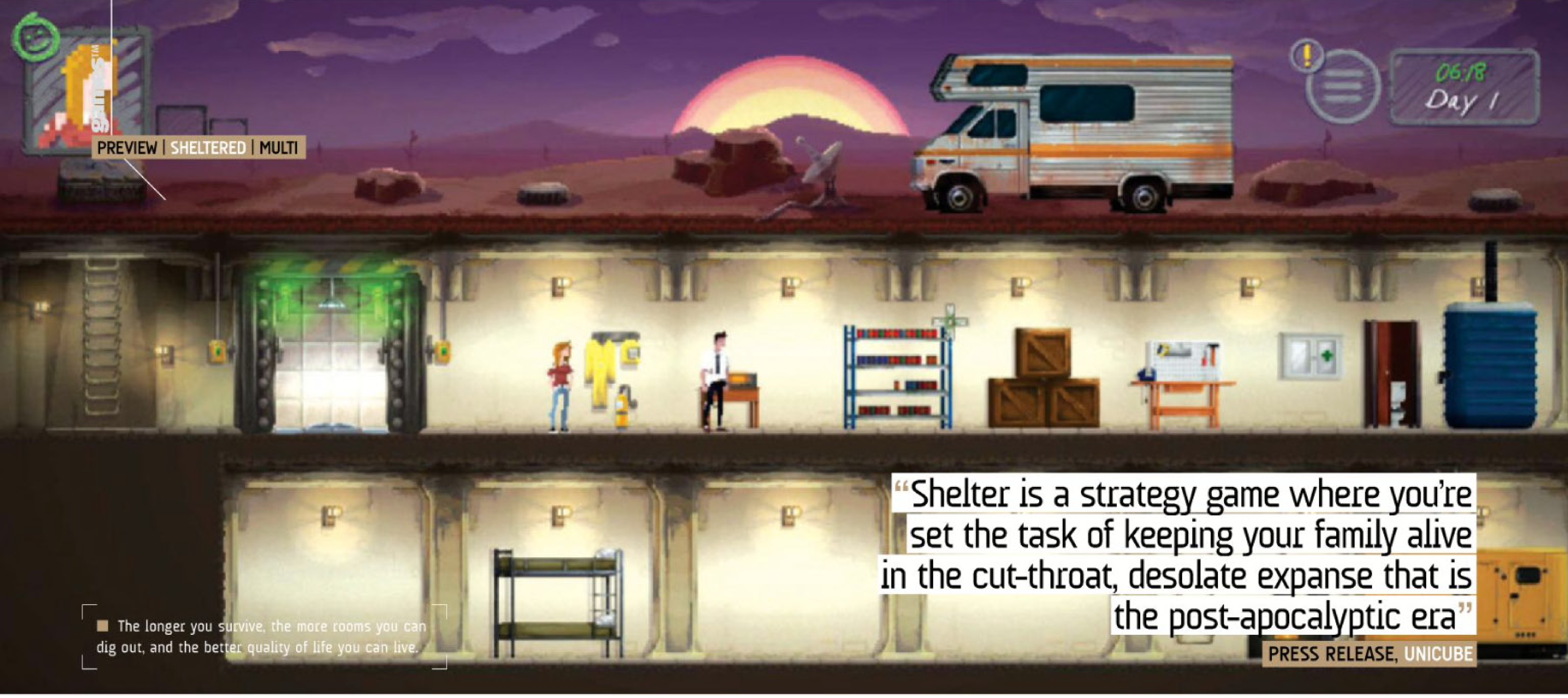
High Point

Although technically developed by Gaming Minds' defunct predecessor, Ascaron, *Dark Star One* was the team's best received game to date – a space-faring *Elite*-a-like that was later ported to 360.





■ Above: As the plebs become more civilised, they'll no longer be satisfied with grain, and will start demanding jewellery and nice clothes as well.



■ The longer you survive, the more rooms you can dig out, and the better quality of life you can live.

"Shelter is a strategy game where you're set the task of keeping your family alive in the cut-throat, desolate expanse that is the post-apocalyptic era"
PRESS RELEASE, UNICUBE

Sheltered

CONCEPT ■ A family of four has found an abandoned bunker, and tries to carve out a life for themselves in a post-nuclear world. Trade, barter, gather and sustain yourself for as long as you can

There's no big apocalypse, just an endless procession of little ones

We've just eaten our son. We didn't want to, but in tough times, you rely on desperate measures. He got sick, you see, from radiation poisoning. While the dad of our little nuclear family (no pun intended) was out scouting for supplies to bring back to our bunker, the air filter broke, and radiation-riddled air began to seep into our new home. Our daughter was making a bed for her exhausted mother to sleep in, and our son – in the shower – began to rapidly deteriorate.

By the time the dad got back from his excursion, his son was gone. There was nothing anyone could do. Being the utilitarian freaks that we are, we carved up his body and stored it in cans. By the end of the same day, we were eating him. The 'trauma' levels of the whole family were rising, the daughter was sick with food poisoning, and the mother was sleeping off some illness of her own. With no-where left to turn, the dad left the bunker, back into the wastelands, searching for something that would keep his family alive longer.

We found a school, loaded with valuable items to trade. But as we were exploring, another survivor of the nuclear holocaust found us, and became hostile (they clearly wanted the scant food supplies we scavenged for themselves). We got into a fight – in a very traditional side-on one-on-one RPG battle, and lost… the stranger executed us. Now it was just the mother and daughter back in the bunker, eating their dead family member, struggling for air, looking death in the face.

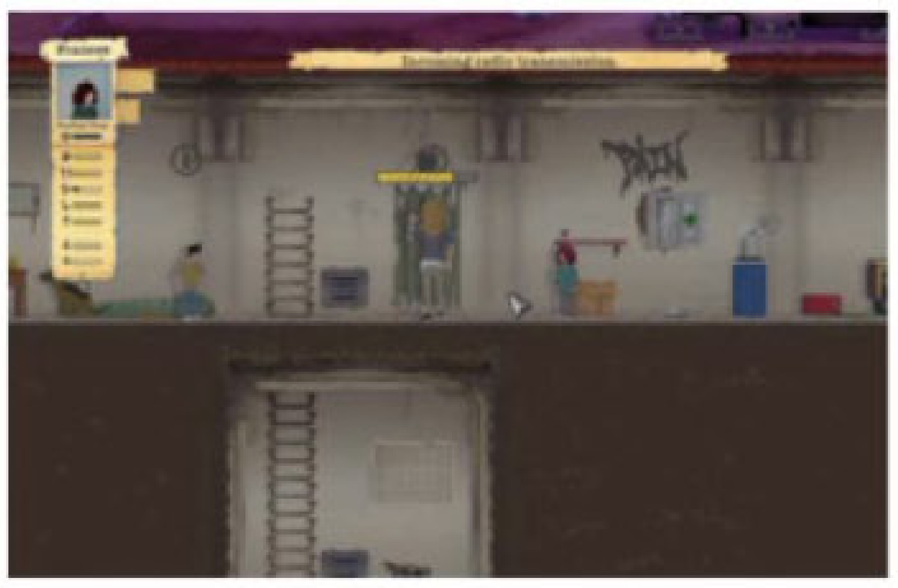
Sheltered is bleak. It's unforgiving. You can't win. It fires on all our favourite parts of 'bunker fiction' – that is to say, the only end game is survival. You might be able to etch out a more comfortable existence in your new subterranean world, but this game has no major goal. Just live. For as long as you can. Fight off the stress, the trauma, the violence, the radiation, the starvation, the cabin fever. Fend it off as long as you can and maybe you can make a better world for your family.

We lasted 17 days. We thought that was pretty good – resorting to cannibalism was where it all began to go wrong, granted, but until then we set up a pretty good ecosystem: our water filters meant we had a surplus of drinking water, which it turns out, is a pretty valuable resource in the radiated husk of a world. So we traded for food, construction tools and resources, and even managed to recruit another stranger into our lair to pitch in with, well, *surviving*.

But still, we only lasted 17 days. The game is out on Xbox Preview Program right now, if you think you can beat that. We reckon you can't. Survival, as it turns out, is *hard*.



■ There's a busted old RV on top of your bunker – get good enough tools and learn how to fix it up and you can venture further to get your survival goods.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Team 17
Developer: Unicube
Release: 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Unicube is composed of three main developers – Dean Foster, the lead programmer/designer, Ben Ridge (responsible for the OST and audio design) and finally Sonny Meek: lead artist, programmer and designer. Between them, Unicube has been working on *Sheltered* for over a year, and was recently brought into the Team 17 studio where the publisher is helping smooth over some of the more challenging areas of game polishing.



The environment has been designed by the same artist responsible for *Viva Piñata* and *Banjo-Kazooie* – can you tell?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC, PS4, Wii U
Origin: UK
Publisher: Team17
Developer: Playtonic Games
Release: October 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Playtonic Games is formed of ex-Rare staffers that wanted to create a spiritual successor to the popular games the studio released during its Nintendo 64 era. These staffers include Chris Sutherland (lead programmer, voice actor), Steve Mayles (character artist) and Steven Hurst (environmental artist) – between all three of them, we expect a faithful Rare-esque adventure to be very well-presented.

Yooka-Laylee

CONCEPT Yooka, a manoeuvrable lizard, and his bat-friend, Laylee, are on a quest – a quest to collect everything they possibly can in a bright, attractive world

A Rare treat

Yooka-Laylee isn't going to be a copy of *Banjo-Kazoiee.* Considering the similar naming conventions, similar art styles and overall similarity between the games, we find that surprising. Playtonic isn't scared of wearing its influences on its sleeve, but the game that was successfully funded on Kickstarter doesn't want to simply copy on its 17-year-old predecessor.

Yooka-Laylee doesn't want to trade on nostalgia – it doesn't simply want to rehash the same mechanics and gameplay elements you'll have seen in 1998's *Banjo-Kazooie*. Things like collectible book pages pay homage to Rare's old games, but the overall aim of the game is to introduce newer, more interesting constructs to the 3D platforming genre.

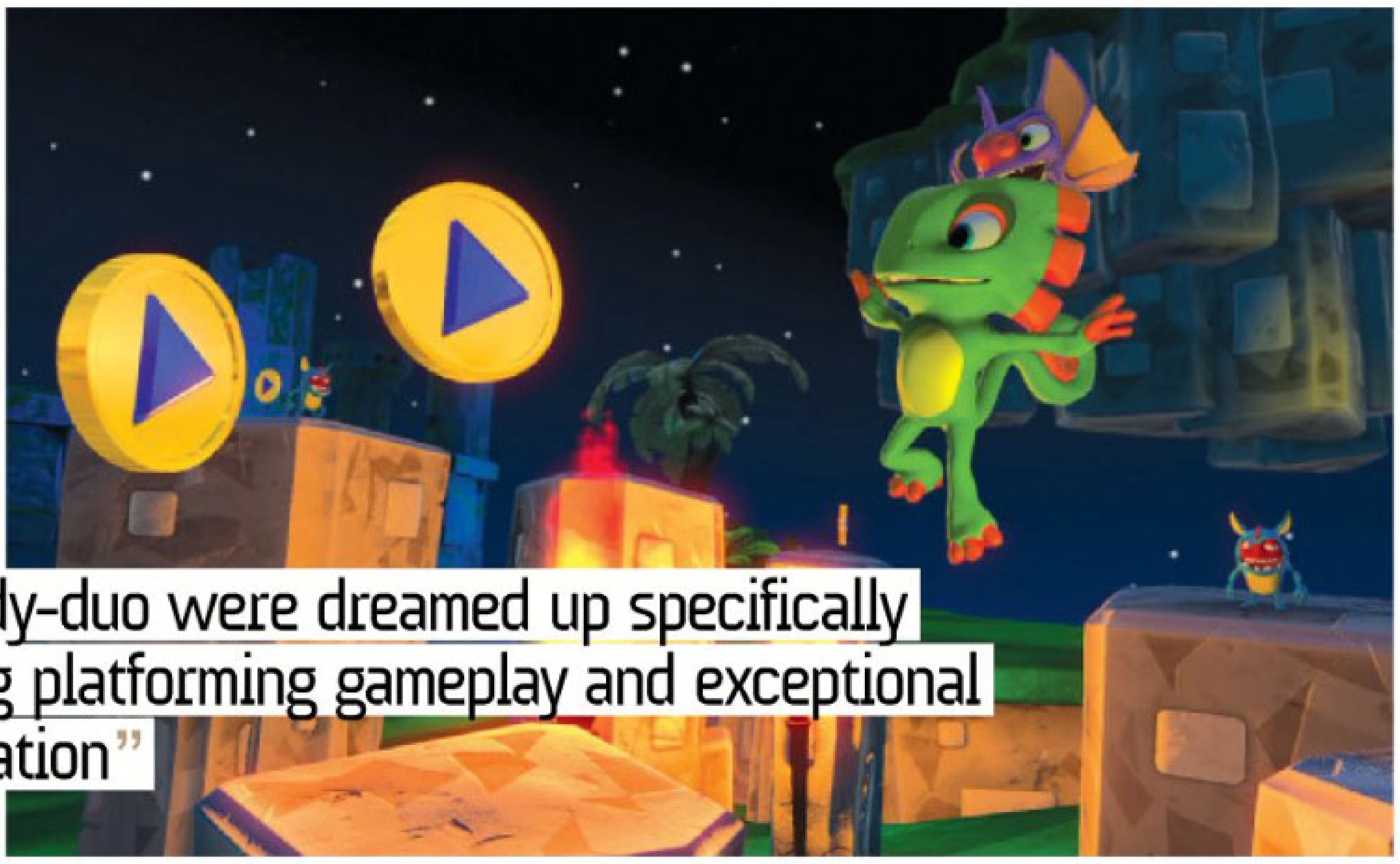
There are, for example, RPG-lite elements to the game: riffing on the studio's name, Play Tonics unlock various abilities and allow you to 'power-up' your characters with new moves – we imagine some of these will work in combat and some of these will work in exploration, like a 3D Metroidvania. You can equip one or two Play Tonics at a time, which will affect the way you tackle any given level at any given time. Some of the Tonics might let you move quicker or fly higher, while others will increase your damage output or stamina.

Then there's the mini-games: like all the best Nintendo 64 games, you'll be able to swerve off the main course of the game to engage in little mine-cart sections or retro-styled mini-games at will. *Yooka-Laylee* designer Gavin Price was a tester back on *Donkey Kong 64*, and as such the game will share a few elements of the Nintendo-licensed game too (that kind of makes sense, because *Donkey Kong 64* itself was a successor to *Banjo-Kazooie* anyway).

The sound design of the game will be as important as it ever was in Rare games – there are characters that can only be found through listening very carefully to the environment, picking up on audio clues to sniff them out of their various nooks and crannies. You can use Laylee's sonar abilities to ping things off your surroundings and echo-locate – a pretty cool feature for a bat to have, and something we wouldn't have seen on old Nintendo 64 tech.

It's movements in inventive, imaginative directions like this that are making us excited for *Yooka-Laylee* – it could well be the rebirth of the action-adventure game we've been waiting for since the start of the last generation. We trust Rare – and if the studio's migrating developers put as much creative energy into *Yooka-Laylee* as their old colleagues did into *Rare Replay*, we'll have a great game on our hands.

The game prides itself on being a collect-em-up platformer, inspired by game series like *Spyro*, *Ratchet & Clank* and *Crash Bandicoot*



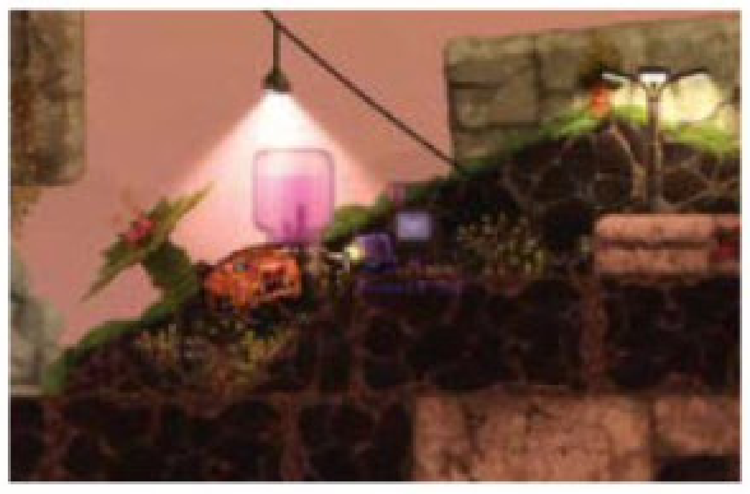
> "Our new buddy-duo were dreamed up specifically for entertaining platforming gameplay and exceptional colour coordination"
>
> YOOKA-LAYLEE WEBSITE

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

COBALT

Format: **Xbox One, Xbox 360, PC**
Publisher: **Mojang**
Developer: **Oxeye Game Studio**
ETA: **October**



ORIGINALLY RELEASED in alpha state on PC and Mac back in June of 2013, *Cobalt* is set to blast its way onto Xbox One, Steam, and Xbox 360 towards the tail end of the year with two-person outfit, Oxeye Game Studio, at the wheel. The tricked out version of this side-scrolling 2D shooter will feature the same cute gun-totting robot, as well as a raft of new features, including a handful of multiplayer modes and space hamsters. Yes, space hamsters.

HOLLOWPOINT

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Paradox Interactive**
Developer: **Ruffian Games**
ETA: **October**



REMEMBER RUFFIAN Games, the Scottish outfit behind *Crackdown 2*? Well, it's back and waving the old meets new flag of game design with *Hollowpoint*, a side-scrolling shooter that blends 2D action with a slick 3D targeting system. Built on a procedurally-generated game engine with support for up to four players, *Hollowpoint* looks set to serve up a healthy dose of gunplay when it ships in October.

HARD WEST

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Gambitious Digital Games**
Developer: **CreativeForge Games**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



HARD WEST is basically *X-COM*, but set in the Wild West. That's not a bad thing at all. And while the 2K tactical turn-based masterpiece appears to be the main source of inspiration, *Hard West* is also cribbing from other areas too, namely horror, with it's nifty blend of weirdness and gore that wouldn't look out of place in a splatter title. With a tight combat system at play, and a story that promises lots of twists and turns, we're keeping a close eye on this one.

EXTREME EXORCISM

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **RipStone Games**
Developer: **Golden Ruby Games**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



EXTREME EXORCISM puts a quirky spin on ridding the world of demons, by replacing holy water and seances with rocket launchers and pistols. You play as Mae Barrons, a medium tasked with ridding a haunted house of malevolent spectres. There's an interesting mechanic at play here too: each time you whack a ghost, another takes its place, mimicking everything you did in the round before, which should make for some solid replay value.

MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Devolver Games**
Developer: **Le Cartel**
ETA: **2016**



IF YOU like your gore by the bucket-load, then you're definitely going to want to check out *Mother Russia Bleeds*. A cross between *Streets Of Rage* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *MRB* is an ultra-violent side-scrolling co-op brawler that looks set to churn stomachs and pummel eyeballs with its twisted story of imprisoned street fighters battling an oppressive criminal authority.

POLLEN

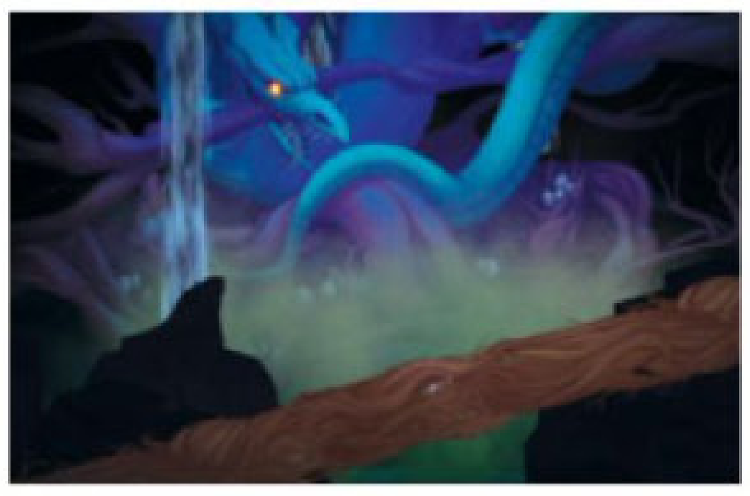
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Mindfield Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



FIRST-PERSON games are a good fit for VR, so it's no surprise that Mindfield Games has crafted a sci-fi adventure game designed to take real advantage of virtual reality headsets. Set on Titan, Saturn's largest moon, *Pollen* plans to borrow from the likes of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, so expect to be left scratching your heads wondering what just happened by the time the end credits roll on this one.

JOTUN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Thunder Lotus Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **September**



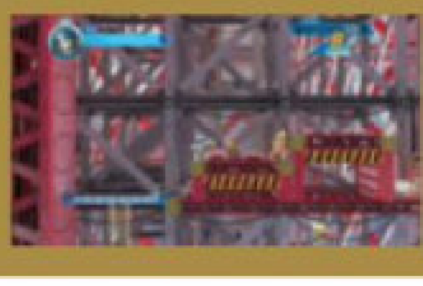
CONSIDER YOURSELF a fan of epic boss fights? *Jotun* is something to look out for in September. Cut from the same cloth as *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Titan Souls*, *Jotun* is built around the idea of challenging and unique boss battles, with very little in between. There are stunning visuals at play here too, as well as a nicely honed combat system and a whole world full of unique enemies.

PAMELA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **NVYVE Studios**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2016**

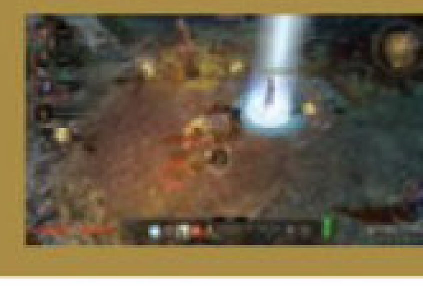


TAKE THE art style of *Mirror's Edge* and *Mass Effect* and mash it with first-person survival horror and you've got *PAMELA*. Set in a futuristic world on an island colony, *PAMELA* thrusts you into the role of a randomly-generated character in a world overrun with infected humans. The goal? Stay alive as long as possible. While it's still early days in development, Toronto-based NVYVE Studios promises co-op and a perma-death mode.



DELAYED – Mighty No. 9 (Multi)

Keiji Inafune's highly anticipated spiritual successor to *Mega Man* has seen its release pushed back to Q1 2016 from what we thought would be a mid-September launch. Still some polishing to go.



DELAYED – Sword Coast Legends (PC)

Originally expected to be arriving in early September, this impressive-looking isometric RPG set in the Dungeons & Dragons universe has been delayed to the end of September on PC and late 2015 on consoles.

SKY ARENA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **HammerLabs**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



DEVELOPED BY Simon Klein and Oliver Eberlei of HammerLabs, *Sky Arena* is an eye-popping multiplayer blaster that puts you at the controls of a jet fighter in a weird, colourful world that owes more than a debt or two to Cartoon Network. Kitted out with four-player online play and offline multiplayer, this nifty little PC title looks like a lot of fun, and with early access planned for this year, it won't be long before we get to check it out.

HELLBLADE

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Ninja Theory**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED as a PS4 exclusive, and now PC, Ninja Theory's latest is a genuinely intriguing beast that, while based on historical events, attempts to address a number of themes, including mental health. It's a daring approach, but the dev isn't taking any chances with it's subject material; it's enlisted the help of a psychiatrist from the University of Cambridge to consult on the main character's descent into her own personal abyss.

THE INTRUDER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Mister Royzo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



RIFFING ON the likes of the *Slender Man* titles, *The Intruder* is a one-man developer show that casts you as a homeowner whose abode is under invasion. The game basically gives you a few in-game days to prepare yourself for the encounter with the game's titular nemesis, tasking you with hunting down weapons, ammunition and tools. You can even fortify your home to stave off the dastardly lurker's assault plans.

FORMA.8

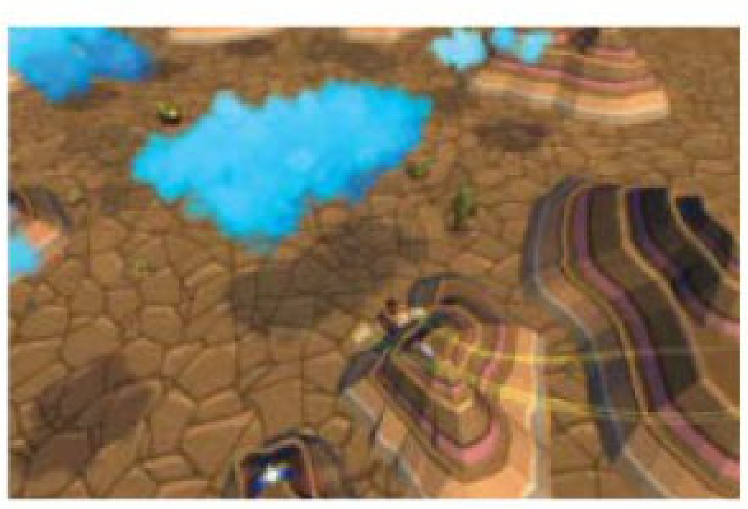
Format: **PS4, PS Vita, WiiU, iOS, PC**
Publisher: **MixedBag**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **September**



FORMA.8 IS an eye-catching little action adventure title from the team behind *Futuridium EP Deluxe* on PS4 that sees you piloting a little robot probe around an alien planet in a bid to recover an energy source from a series of perilous cave systems. Billed as a metroidvania by the developers, the game adds myriad puzzles, enemies and power-ups to keep things interesting as you manoeuvre through the planet's labyrinthine caverns.

CLOUD CHASERS

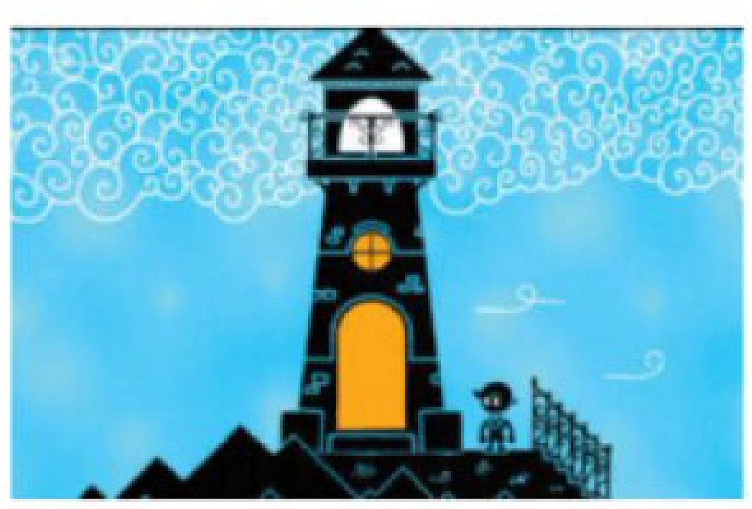
Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **BlindFlug**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



PENCILLED IN for release later this year, and drawing from the hardships of immigration, *Cloud Chasers* is a survival game set in a vast open desert where you control a father/daughter team as they set out to find their new home. Unfurling in a world filled with flying islands, the goal is to survive a trek across five perilous deserts in an attempt to reach a safe haven high above the clouds.

HUE

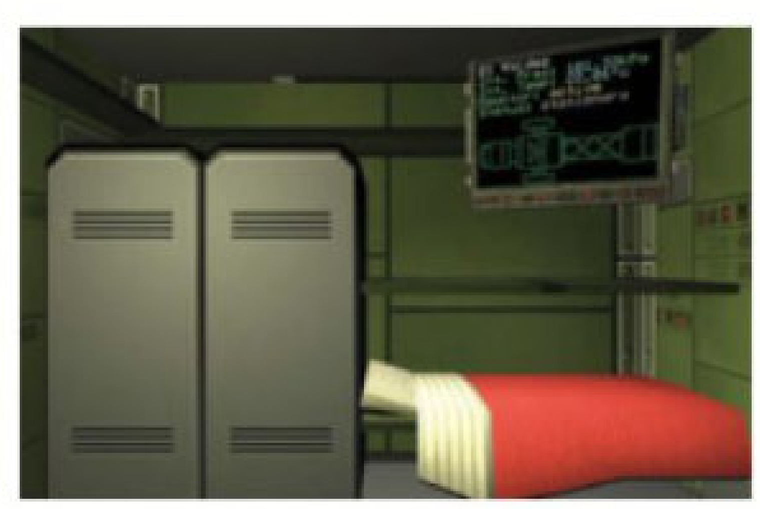
Format: **PS4, PS3, Xbox One, WiiU, PS Vita, PC**
Publisher: **Fiddlesticks**
Developer: **In-house/Curve Digital**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



LONDON-BASED FIDDLESTICKS nabbed the Indie Showcase award at this year's People's Choice Awards at Develop: Brighton, so it's no surprise that the game has been announced for just about every platform going, with Curve Digital handling porting duties for Nintendo's ailing WiiU. The game is a platform puzzler set in a harshly crafted world where everyone sees in greyscale.

OBJECTS IN SPACE

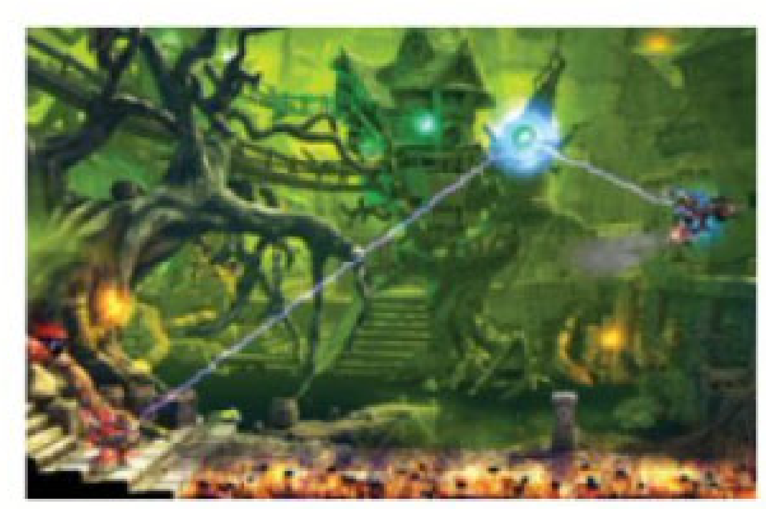
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Flat Earth Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



FLAT EARTH Games' deep space stealth trading game apparently takes its gameplay cues from oldschool submarine combat titles. Set in a world light years away from Earth, you play a ship's pilot tasked with carrying cargo and defending yourself from attack in a world filled with a variety of bad guys. *Objects In Space* looks like an interesting style departure for the two-man Australian team.

DIESELSTORMERS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Black Forest Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



FROM THE ashes of Spellbound Entertainment, *Dieselstormers* has been taken on by Black Forest Games. The game pits players against waves of orcs and goblins using kick-ass customisable weapons, and you can play an early access version on Steam right now if that's your thing, with the finished product expected sometime later this year.



30 YEARS OF SUPER MARIO BROS.

How one series has set the bar for platforming action



It starts with some spare arcade cabinets and the idea of a love triangle.

So the tale goes, the failure of *Radar Scope* in arcades in North America lead to Nintendo's president at the time, Hiroshi Yamauchi, turning to a game artist in his late twenties, one Shigeru Miyamoto, to design something for the converted cabinets. What Miyamoto came up with was a *Popeye*-inspired love triangle that created Pauline, Donkey Kong and Jumpman. The latter would go on to be rechristened Mario during the development of a sequel, *Donkey Kong Jr.* And a new hero of gaming was born.

But that was just the origin story. It was *Super Mario Bros.* that really turned Mario into one of the biggest entertainment icons in the world. With 40.24 million copies sold, it remains the best selling *Mario* game of all time and a masterclass in game design. With limited memory space, the team found ways of making Mario really stand out.

With all of this in mind we were delighted to speak exclusively with the creator of this iconic character and game, Shigeru Miyamoto, as well as his long-time collaborator and creative partner Takashi Tezuka, an unsung hero of the Mario franchise and many other classic Nintendo titles. »



“When I first entered Nintendo, games were not in the family home”





The Real Mario Brothers

games™ sits down with the creative team that has worked on Super Mario Bros. for the last 30 years, Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka

For the last 30 years *Super Mario Bros.* has been a hugely influential game. What is it like knowing that you've had that kind of impact?

SM: I'm really grateful because I think just by nature of being a creator, generally speaking, a lot of people who create, even if they make something of a high quality, they make something that is really dear to them, it's never publicised and it doesn't reach so many people. And that can be challenging sometimes. So I feel even more grateful as a creator that there are sometimes even people waiting to see my creation and anticipating it and for me I just feel very lucky.

TT: When I first entered Nintendo, it was still more that games were outside and not in the family home. It wasn't until later that it became part of the music, film, hobby lifestyle gradually. At this point now, even being interviewed by a magazine itself is just really unbelievable.

Was it the intention to create *Super Mario Maker* as a game that could inspire people into making games themselves?

TT: Yes, it was very important to me as I created this. For me, when it comes to videogames, it's quite simple that the objective of the game is going from start to finish, but how much do you think about it? How much of the time do you try to be creative in achieving that objective? I think that creates a memorable experience. I did want to create that feeling and add that creativity into *Super Mario Maker*.

SM: I've always thought that creating games is really fun, however the focus for me has mostly been puzzle games. I started off producing *Mario Vs DK* for Game Boy and that expanded and continued on to the Nintendo DS and so forth. But Tezuka-san was working on *Mario Paint* and he kind of expanded that range of the puzzle game, incorporating editing tools into the game. I think that *Super Mario Maker* really fits into that evolution.





Super Mario Maker started life as an attempt to reboot the classic *Mario Paint* series for Wii U.

Presumably you went back to some of the original game documents in creating *Super Mario Maker* – was it strange looking back at those files?

TT: Actually, there aren't that many old documents. Because of that I had to go back and play the actual game and sometimes even read strategy books, and really dig into my memory as well, working through that. And so even as we prepared the four different skins, we had to be very imaginative and the artists had to be very creative. What would happen if you put the ghost skin from *Super Mario Bros. 3* in *Super Mario Bros.*? What would it look like? It was a very imaginative and creative process for the artists. Towards the later part of the development phase I strongly requested to add Yoshi as well and I think the staff struggled a little bit in trying to make sure that it fit.

SM: I think switching the skin could be easy and straightforward in your mind, but it really impacted how we thought about the controls. Sometimes you might not be able to do the hip drop or the wall jump. It impacts the motions and the controls and it really changes the difficulty of the courses. Maybe it gets too easy to complete a course and so from a conceptual point of view it would almost »

» have been impossible. Because this was an editor tool we were able to be a little bit less restrictive about it. The whole idea is for people to play freely and create whatever they want so we were able to expand the restrictions or expand the possibilities and be less restrictive on what is allowed. For example, Blooper is only in the ocean, in the water worlds, and that's why he's swimming, but in the open air he's still swimming in this as well. It actually makes it a little bit humorous.

And then, going back and looking at the old games, it was a little bit refreshing, because I think we had it almost a little bit better in our minds. We had it in our mind that it was a great game, but then we actually played it and we were like, 'Oh, this part is not as great as we remembered it'. We felt a little bit embarrassed as well at times looking back. That was an enjoyable experience going back.

So, we have the original documents in this book [released with *Super Mario Maker*], so you can see it here, but we didn't make copies. We would literally write it with our own hands – the game designs, the illustrations – and hand it to the game programmers. Some of the stuff we had totally forgotten we had we found from an old programmer who had it. Looking back and being like, 'Oh my gosh, I didn't even remember this', it was really fun to look at these old documents. It was really just one copy we had of these original documents. There were a lot of valuables we found through this experience.

TT: One of the things we really put effort into was switching between the screens, the response time to it, as well as the UI, which I wanted to make as simple as possible. Then going even further, we wanted to make the user experience as smooth and as seamless as possible as you switch between the skins and the scenes, so the user can try them out right away. As an example, we tried to keep the number of tool icons to a minimum, so rather than adding more icons you can shake the icon to change it to something else. You're able to do more than the number of icons you can see. With the player exploring and experimenting with the different combinations, we wanted the player to be able to discover it by themselves.



Between them, Miyamoto and Tezuka have worked on all of the biggest franchises Nintendo has ever released.

> "We don't have other teams develop it, because we do want to control it"





In going back to the old documents was there anything that you rediscovered that you had forgotten about?

SM: I was pretty impressed with myself because looking at the old documents I was pretty thorough in what I drew and wrote. [Laughs]

Famously, the design of Mario was somewhat dictated by the limitations of 8-bit. Was there anything else that was due to a limitation that has become a staple of the series?

TT: Because of the limitations we had to be a little bit creative. For example, in *Super Mario Bros.* the shape of the clouds is the same as the grass.

SM: And we found that in the old documents as well, so I was really impressed. Another example is that because the character numbers were limited, mushrooms and Goombas would animate with just a click. So, the animations were limited too and we would just need to flip the animations around and be creative so that it looked different. The memory was limited too so we had to be creative with the variety of enemies we could create with the limited memory.



Super Mario Maker is releasing with an art book, which includes original *Super Mario Bros.* sketches.



TT: As another example, when Mario runs we would have probably wanted eight different patterns and made it a lot more smooth in how it looked. But Miyamoto-san mentioned that if he runs really fast you can't really tell, so we just kept it to three different patterns when Mario runs. But we didn't cut edges or anything. For example, when Mario flips around and starts running in the opposite direction we did include a turn pose in the middle so you can see that as he's turning.

Mario's design has remained pretty consistent over the last 30 years. How did you resist the urge to modernise Mario?

TT: I do think it's changed a bit... For example, in *Mario 3* we made him a little bit cuter. And perhaps with the Tanooki tail and the cape we definitely added items and features so that there's more variety in Mario's actions.

SM: In terms of the 3D Mario performance, it has evolved, but we have always been consistent in trying to be cautious in terms of when you do a B-dash, how far he can jump or how many blocks can he break. We have made it a little bit simpler for players as it's evolved, because there are more complicated things that we're asking the players to do. In the original *Mario* when you're stopped he can't do B-dash, but you can do it now with recent games. So we have made it a little bit simpler and tweaked it throughout the years. In terms of *Mario* games we definitely don't have other teams develop it, because we do want to control it and manage those features. »

The Miyamoto/Tezuka Connection

Over 30 years and so many games

New Super Mario Bros. U [2012]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Super Mario 3D Land [2011]
SM: Producer
TT: General producer

Super Mario Galaxy 2 [2010]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

New Super Mario Bros. Wii [2009]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Wii Music [2008]
SM: Producer, designer
TT: Producer

New Super Mario Bros. [2006]
SM: Supervisor
TT: General producer

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door [2004]
SM: Producer
TT: Character supervisor

Pikmin 2 [2004]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap [2004]
SM: Producer
TT: Supervisor

Mario Kart: Double Dash [2003]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Super Mario Sunshine [2002]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker [2002]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Luigi's Mansion [2001]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Pikmin [2001]
SM: Producer
TT: Progress management

The Legend Of Zelda: Oracle Of Ages [2001]
SM: Producer
TT: Supervisor

The Legend Of Zelda: Oracle Of Seasons [2001]
SM: Producer
TT: Supervisor

The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask [2000]
SM: Producer
TT: Supervisor

The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time [1998]
SM: Director, producer, designer
TT: Supervisor

Star Fox 64 [1997]
SM: Producer
TT: Supervisor

Yoshi's Story [1997]
SM: Producer
TT: Producer

Super Mario 64 [1997]
SM: Director, Producer
TT: Assistant Director

Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island [1995]
SM: Producer
TT: Director

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past [1991]
SM: Producer TT: Director

Super Mario World [1990]
SM: Producer
TT: Director

Super Mario Bros. 3 [1988]
SM: Director, producer, designer
TT: Director, designer

The Legend Of Zelda [1986]
SM: Director, producer, designer
TT: Director, designer, writer

Super Mario Bros. 2 (The Lost Levels) [1986]
SM: Director
TT: Director, designer

Super Mario Bros. [1985]
SM: Director, producer, designer
TT: Assistant director, designer

Devil World [1984]
SM: Designer
TT: Game designer



Mario's Most Unlikely Appearances

The plumber has stretched himself beyond the typical releases over the years



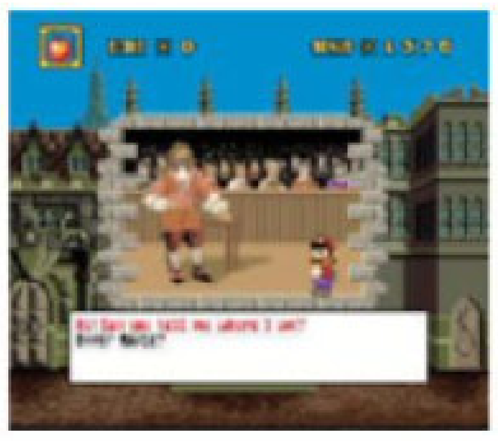
Dance Dance Revolution Mario Mix [2005]
Packed with Mario characters and music, this remains the only *Dance Dance Revolution* title released on a Nintendo console outside of Japan. It even had a plot, involving Waluigi stealing the Music Keys and either Mario or Luigi being tasked with bringing them back… through the power of dance.



Mario & Sonic at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games [2013]
We had already seen the unlikely situation of Mario and Sonic involved in a footrace in *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games* in 2007, but the Winter Olympics was even more surprising. We never thought we would see Mario curling or figure skating.



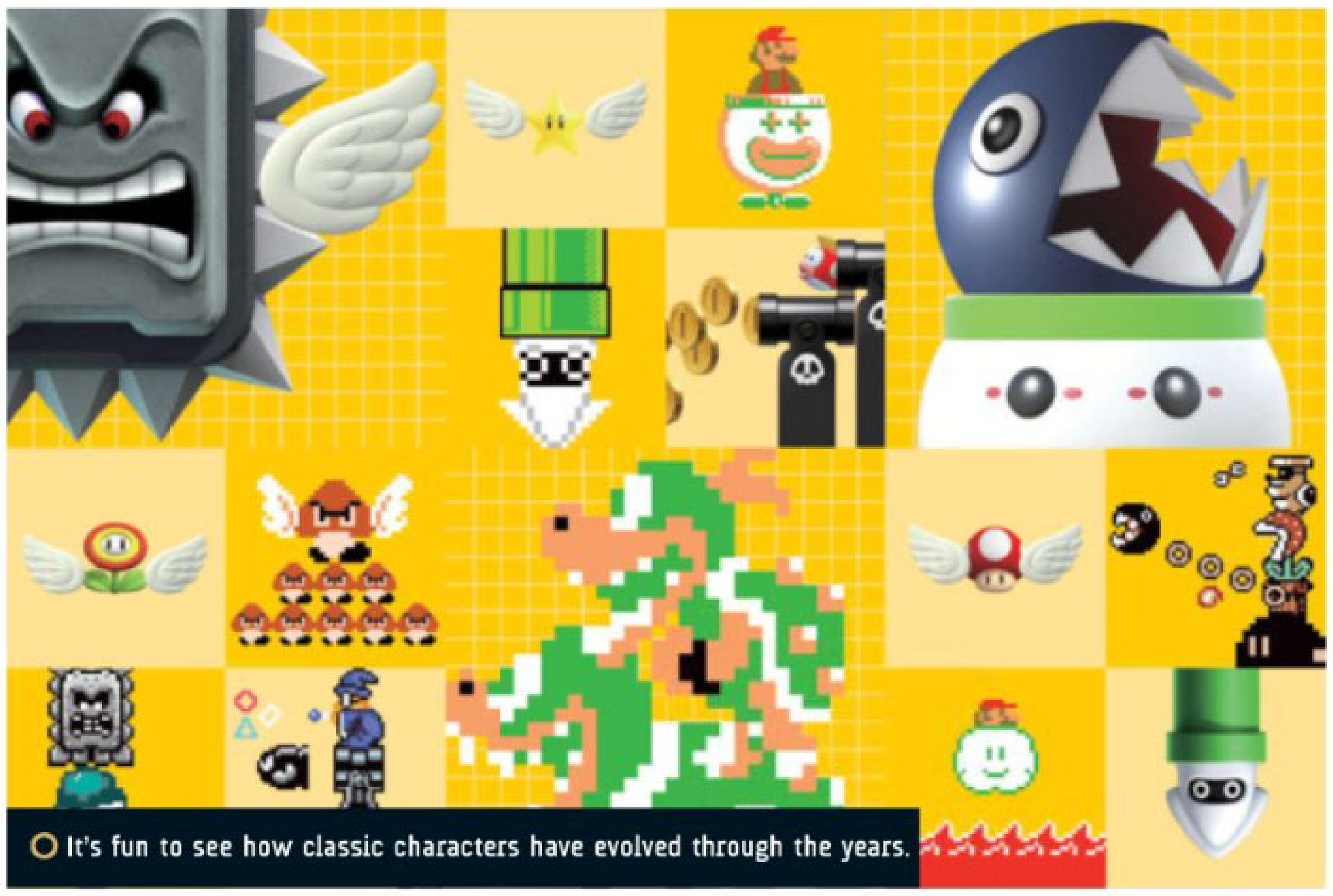
Mario Hoops 3-on-3 [2006]
Once again, Mario had already starred in a few sports titles, involving tennis, golf, football and eventually even baseball, but there's something especially strange about this truncated game of basketball on the DS. With the touchpad used for passing and shooting control, it wasn't exactly the most intuitive experience.



Mario's Time Machine [1993]
Strange for a number of reasons, not least for the fact it was released on Windows PCs before anything else, this is an educational game that has Mario travelling through time, attempting to retrieve artefacts stolen by Bowser by answering questions on historical figures.



Mario's Picross [1995]
Picross is a classic form of picture logic puzzle. Think Sudoku mixed with Pictionary on a pixel grid. It's not exactly the first thing we would have thought of for Mario, but it proved popular enough to spawn sequels, *Picross 2* also released on Game Boy and *Super Picross* for Super Famicom in Japan.



It's fun to see how classic characters have evolved through the years.

> "Mario is an old man and no one would really ever create an old man, so I think that really makes it unique"

What do you think it is about Mario himself that has made him such a long-lasting and popular character in gaming?

SM: For me it's very simple, and perhaps it's a little bit weird for me to say this, but I really think it's because the game is fun. If it were a different character I think that character would be popular.

TT: I agree. I think that the character is very important, but at the same time it's even more about the gameplay and when you do some kind of movement or action it's really important for the player to be able to sympathise. So when you see an enemy coming towards you, you feel fear. If you fall in a hole maybe you'll think, 'Oh my God, he must have felt pain'. It's really about emotional attachment and being able to sympathise and share the experience that Mario has within the game world.

SM: Also with Nintendo, we've always as a company tried to be unique and innovative and so we really try not to think too much about what's trendy right now or who are the characters that are popular. With Mario, he's an old man and no one would really ever create an old man, so I think that really makes it unique and left a strong impression on people. It applies to Pikmin, it applies to Splatoon. No one really creates a squid character so it's really memorable. There's nothing to compare it with or compete with. And the really important thing is that the character really fits with the game world.

World 1:1 does a great job of teaching the player what to fear and what to avoid. How much planning went into that design?

TT: I really think Miyamoto-san put a lot of thought into the first course. Even if you look at the draft documents as



we drew it out we really simulated what a first-time player would do and experience. Emotionally too; if you saw a Goomba coming maybe they would want to jump onto the platform on top. So we really looked at the details and simulated the player's experience and thought process, designing the course based on that.

SM: I don't want people to think that I'm a manipulator, necessarily, based on that comment. It's really about my intention of wanting players to really understand the game mechanic, so just on the first and second stages we want the player to fully understand the game and for the rest of it be able to generally enjoy the game. Even when our testing team was playing the game I would stand behind them to see if what I simulated or what I thought is happening or not.

TT: Sometimes you forget what a first-time player experiences or goes through as you continue to design games. It's interesting to go back and refresh what it takes, because just the game control of using your left and right hands very differently in itself could be a new experience for a first-time game player. From that point of view it's really important and good to continue refreshing your memory of what that experience is.

What was the scariest moment of working on the series? Was it the leap from 2D to 3D on the N64?

SM: For me personally I really enjoyed changing between 2D and 3D. I always wanted to see what people who know Mario would imagine 3D Mario to look like. There were a lot of people who couldn't make that transition. It did help with our next challenge of what do we need to do, how do we address 3D? And the reason why *New Super Mario* was named that way, with the 'New', was that Tezuka-san really addressed that and even though it goes back to the original foundation of Mario we didn't want it to look old.



Miyamoto and Tezuka's passion for games seems as alive now as it was 30 years ago when they created *SMB*.

Have there ever been any choices you've made during the series that you feared might be controversial?

SM: For me one of the things was maybe the gap between the really advanced players and the first-time players. The difficulty balance is always something that I hear frustrations about from the public, whichever way we decide to go. We always have the testing team test our game, but whatever they say is really fun, the first-time players might consider to be very difficult. One of the things I do sometimes at the later phases of development is go in and hear the testing team's requests and actually pull that away and lower the barrier or change what it is they want. Sometimes I even hear from the testing team, 'You're destroying the fun', but on the other hand, the flipside is you hear the first-time players saying 'If I can't clear a level it's not fun for me. If I can't complete a game it's not fun for me'. The more years that have passed, the gap between advanced and first-time players has become wider.

TT: Even though we put a lot of time and effort into trying to balance the difficulty, when we actually release there are a good group of people who can't complete the whole game, and so we always have that internal struggle of the »



These two men are responsible for some of the most iconic characters in the industry, and they're still going strong.

gap between the advanced and first-time players. That's why one of the things we're trying with *Yoshi's Woolly World* is to have two different versions of events for the advanced and the beginner players. We changed the performance of it, but then even in the beginner mode we did put a lot of stuff in there so that advanced players can still have fun. We put a lot of time and effort into trying to balance that out.

SM: Other examples of how we try to address that or experiment are with the Silver Tanooki in *3D Land* or Luigi playing in *New Super Mario.*

> "I think I'm very free. I can sometimes be irresponsible – I might say anything"

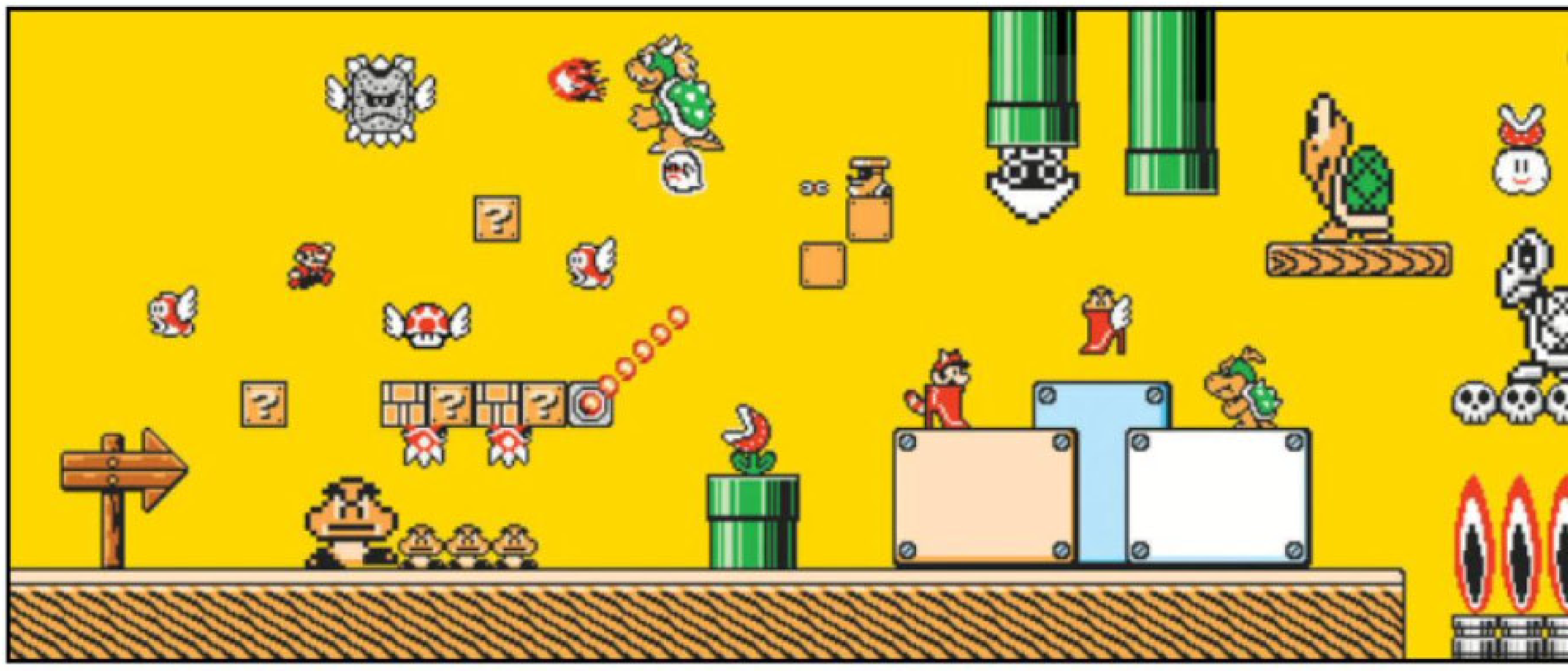
How important has your relationship been with each other over the last 30 years in inspiring each other's creativity?

TT: From my point of view I think I'm very free, I can sometimes be irresponsible – I might say anything. I say a lot of things, but what Miyamoto-San does with my ideas is that anything that I say that he thinks is interesting he makes an effort to try and pull that out, expand that idea and incorporate it in the game.

SM: I see myself as Tezuka-san's translator. Sometimes I think, 'What is this guy talking about?'. But sometimes he says something really important or intuitive and it's really about picking that up and valuing his comments. So, that's my role in the relationship. [Laughs]

That's obviously half-joking. I do think that we're very equal and that we have an equal relationship. Our creative viewpoints might seem very different at times, when it comes to the same issues or problems that we're identifying – the things that we think are fun in the world and we need to pay attention to – a lot of things that we might argue or discuss and think 'Oh, we're so different', but within two or three days we realise there's fundamentally a similar way of thinking.

There's another key person, a third person called Toshihiko Nakago who is a programmer and I think when you look at the three of us we've probably eaten half of our meals together in our lifetimes. That's the kind of relationship we have. When the three of us come together and talk it seems like we have completely different perspectives, but ultimately we have the same perspective on what is the issue right now and what is the challenge right now. I think having the three us has been really integral and we've really worked well together throughout the series. 30 years!



10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SUPER MARIO BROS.

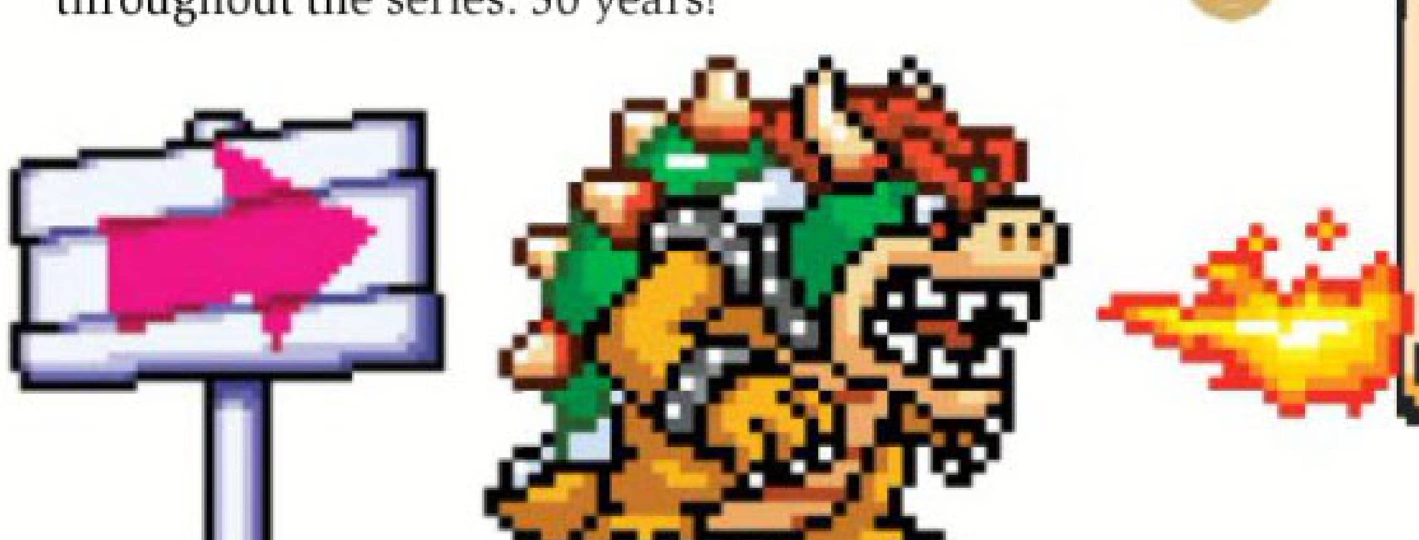
THE ESSENTIAL MARIO KNOWLEDGE THAT EVERY FAN WILL WANT TO KNOW

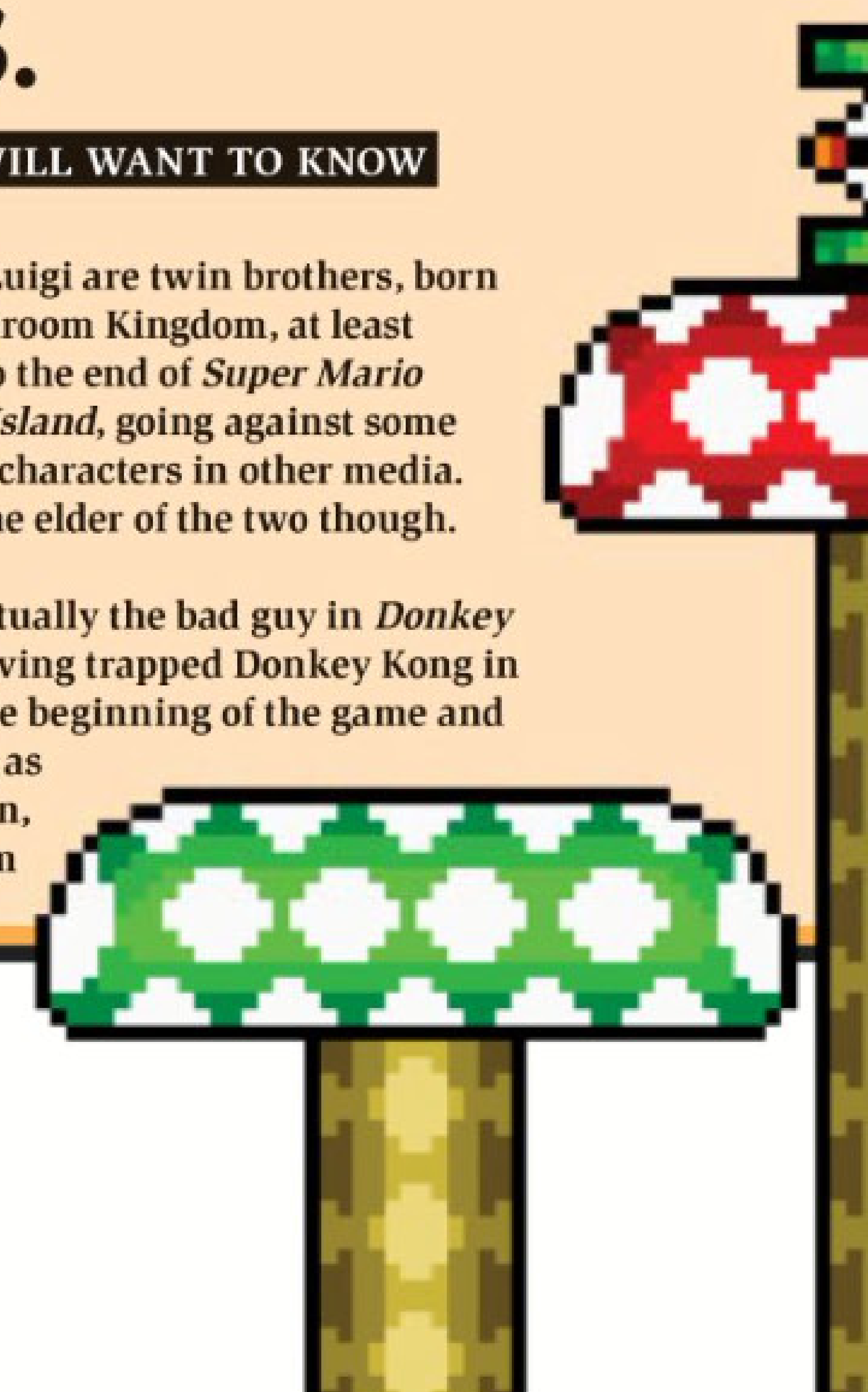
1 It is believed Mario is named after the landlord of the building in which the development team had been staying in America during the development of *Donkey Kong Jr* after he interrupted them to demand rent in the middle of a meeting.

2 *Super Mario Bros.* was made simultaneously with *The Legend Of Zelda*, sharing much of the same development team as well as some ideas. The Fire Bars for instance were added to *Super Mario Bros.* after having been conceived for Zelda.

3 Mario and Luigi are twin brothers, born in the Mushroom Kingdom, at least according to the end of *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*, going against some depictions of the characters in other media. Mario remains the elder of the two though.

4 Mario is actually the bad guy in *Donkey Kong Jr*, having trapped Donkey Kong in a cage at the beginning of the game and with you playing as the great ape's son, trying to help him

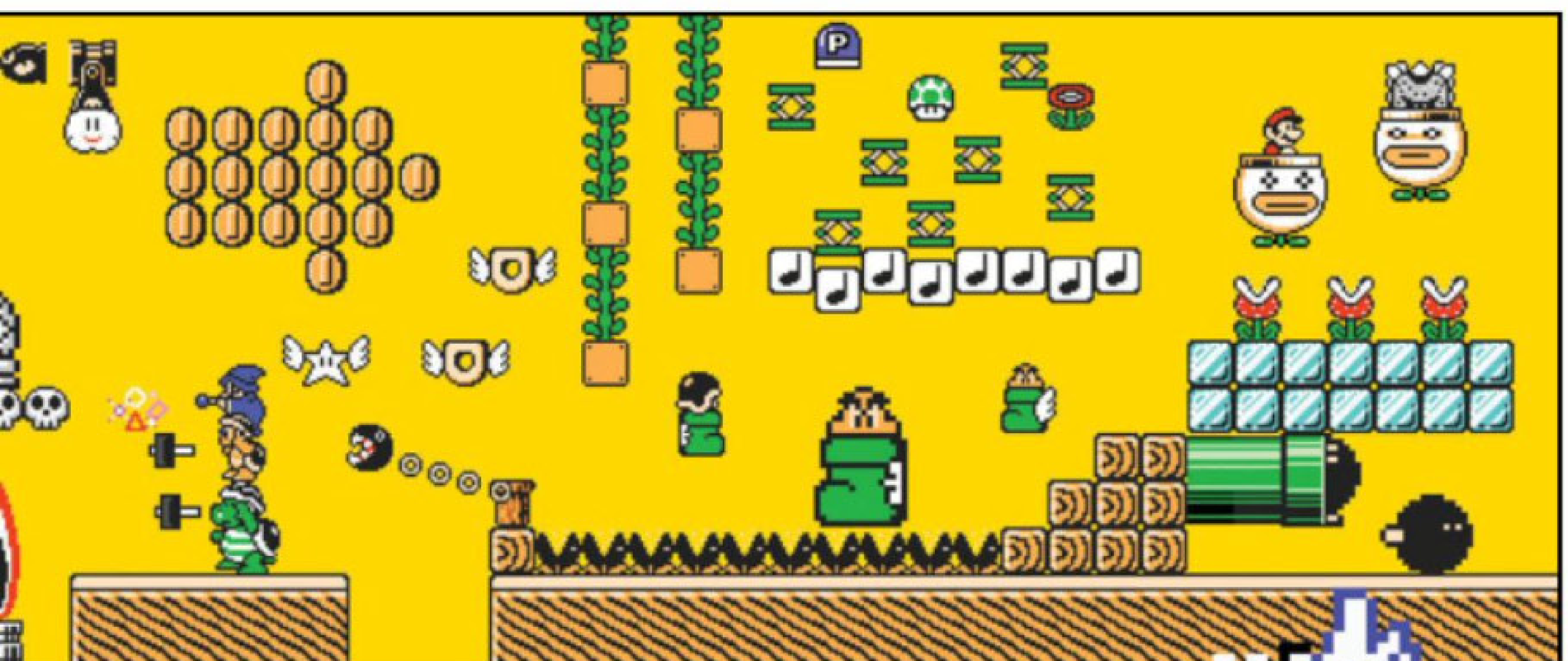












escape from the plumber's clutches. We'd like to think their differences have been settled.

5 Longtime Mario nemesis Wario's name comes from a combination of Mario and the Japanese word for evil, 'warui'. He was actually designed by the same developer who created Samus Aran from *Metroid*, Hiroji Kiyotake.

6 Another name considered for Mario was Mr Video, with Miyamoto stating that he hoped to use him in all of his videogames, inspired partially by the way Alfred Hitchcock would always appear in his own movies. An interesting connection to make.

7 Mario is believed to have made around 100 appearances as a playable character so far, with perhaps another 50 in non-playable roles, making him one of the most prolific game characters in the history of the games industry.

8 Famously, *Super Mario Bros. 2* as we know it in Europe and North America was actually a completely different Shigeru Miyamoto game called *Yume Kojo: Doki Doki Panic*. The real sequel was considered too hard for western gamers, but later released as *The Lost Levels*.

9 The Boo character was originally inspired by Takashi Tezuka's typically even-tempered wife after she became furious with him for working so many late nights. That's why the Boos become angry when you turn away from them, but shrink away when you look at them.

10 The Warp Whistle from *Super Mario Bros. 3* is another borrowed game mechanic from *The Legend Of Zelda*, allowing you to warp to stages further in the game. It even plays the same notes as it did in its original incarnation.

SUPER MARIO MAKER AND A WII U!

To mark the 30th anniversary of *Super Mario Bros.* Nintendo is giving away a *Limited Edition Super Mario Maker Wii U* bundle, which includes a copy of the new game, a black Wii U deluxe console, a pixel Mario amiibo and artbook featuring original sketches from the series.

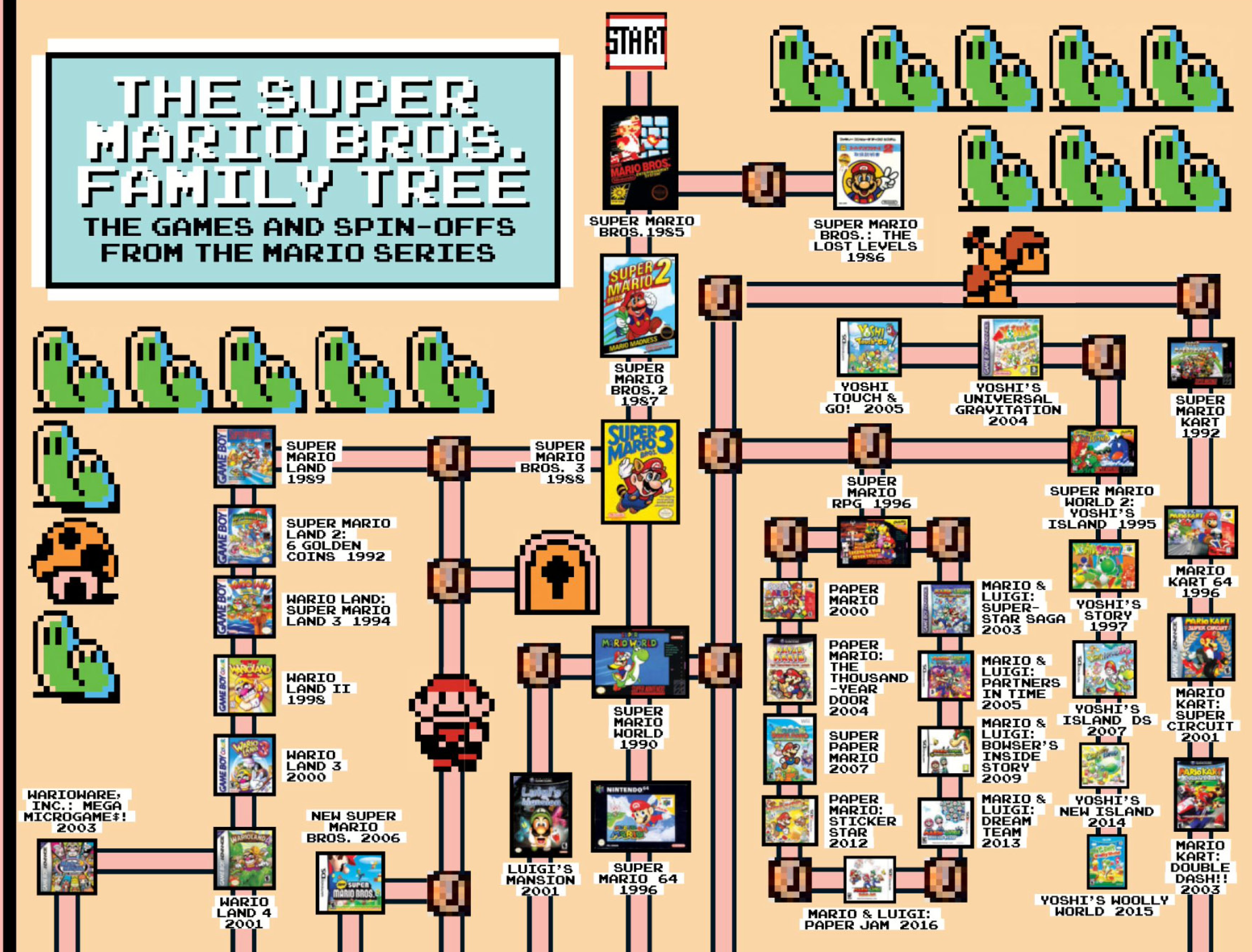
Three runners-up will also win a copy of *Super Mario Maker* each. It's the perfect way to celebrate 30 years of one of the most important game series in our industry and all you have to do to be in with a chance of winning is answer the following question:

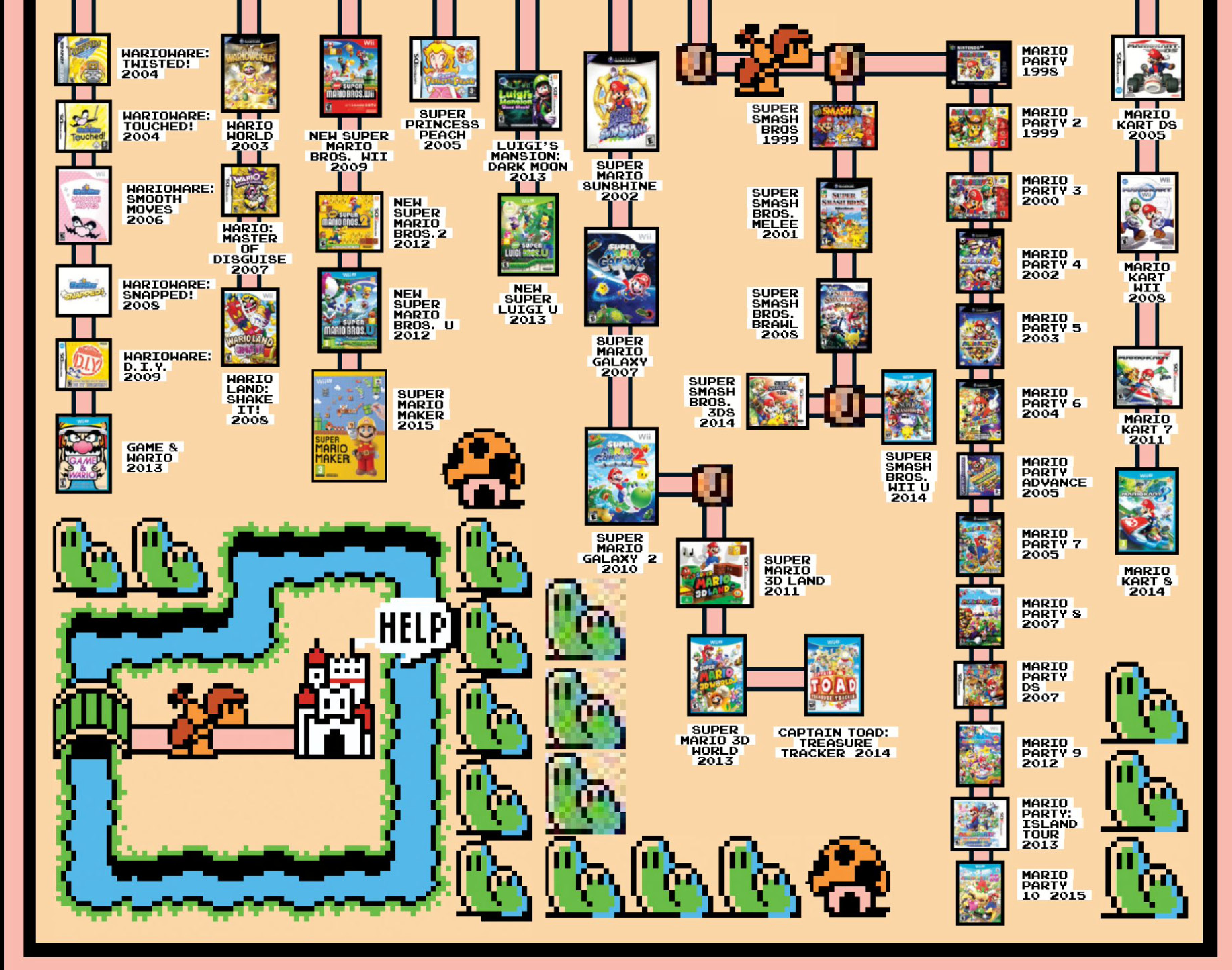
What was the original name for Mario when he first appeared in *Donkey Kong*?

A) **Walkman** B) **Runman** C) **Jumpman**

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. FAMILY TREE

THE GAMES AND SPIN-OFFS FROM THE MARIO SERIES





WARIOWARE: TWISTED! 2004
WARIOWARE: TOUCHED! 2004
WARIOWARE: SMOOTH MOVES 2006
WARIOWARE: SNAPPED! 2008
WARIOWARE: D.I.Y. 2009
GAME & WARIO 2013
WARIO WORLD 2003
WARIO: MASTER OF DISGUISE 2007
WARIO LAND: SHAKE IT! 2008
NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. WII 2009
NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.2 2012
NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U 2012
SUPER MARIO MAKER 2015
SUPER PRINCESS PEACH 2005
LUIGI'S MANSION: DARK MOON 2013
NEW SUPER LUIGI U 2013
SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE 2002
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2007
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2 2010
SUPER MARIO 3D LAND 2011
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD 2013
CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER 2014
SUPER SMASH BROS 1999
SUPER SMASH BROS. MELEE 2001
SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL 2008
SUPER SMASH BROS. 3DS 2014
SUPER SMASH BROS. WII U 2014
MARIO PARTY 1998
MARIO PARTY 2 1999
MARIO PARTY 3 2000
MARIO PARTY 4 2002
MARIO PARTY 5 2003
MARIO PARTY 6 2004
MARIO PARTY ADVANCE 2005
MARIO PARTY 7 2005
MARIO PARTY 8 2007
MARIO PARTY DS 2007
MARIO PARTY 9 2012
MARIO PARTY: ISLAND TOUR 2013
MARIO PARTY 10 2015
MARIO KART DS 2005
MARIO KART WII 2008
MARIO KART 7 2011
MARIO KART 8 2014
HELP



FROM HALO 3 BETA BONUS GAME TO CONSOLE-BREAKING INNOVATOR, CRACKDOWN 3 IS BRINGING NEW TECH AND PROMISE TO MICROSOFT'S CONSOLE

Complete and utter destruction was the target set by Cloudgine and Reagent Games as they set about re-energising the *Crackdown* licence with Microsoft, but what this has spawned has the potential to change Xbox One games forever. That may seem like a bold statement, but actually what it's really delivering is the full promise of the console Microsoft intended to launch in 2013, when the world of gaming turned against it over DRM and always-online functionality. This is the game that could take the Xbox One back to being a digital gaming powerhouse. A games console for the online age, using the full resources of the web to future-proof itself.

And it all started so very simply, building on the sandbox freedom and interactivity the series has already established. "We said if we want to do a true *Crackdown 3* multiplayer, we really wanted to move that physicality into the online space," says Dave Jones, original creator of *Crackdown*, *GTA*, *APB* and now president and co-founder of Cloudgine. »

THE GAME THAT COULD CHANGE THE **XBOX ONE** *FOREVER*





The scale of the city Cloudgine and Reagent is teasing looks intimidatingly large for something that's supposed to be fully destructible. We await confirmation of its final dimensions.

"We started off with a high bar of saying, 'What if for the first time ever we could make the whole world in which you play fully destructible?'. That was what our goal was, because again it was all about this physicality and it begs simple questions, like why in a game can I not just shoot a wall with my bullets and that wall, rather than just having a texture decal stuck on it, why don't my bullets just go through the wall? And if I want to shoot a bigger hole, why can't I step through that hole? So it was about breaking down walls in videogames."

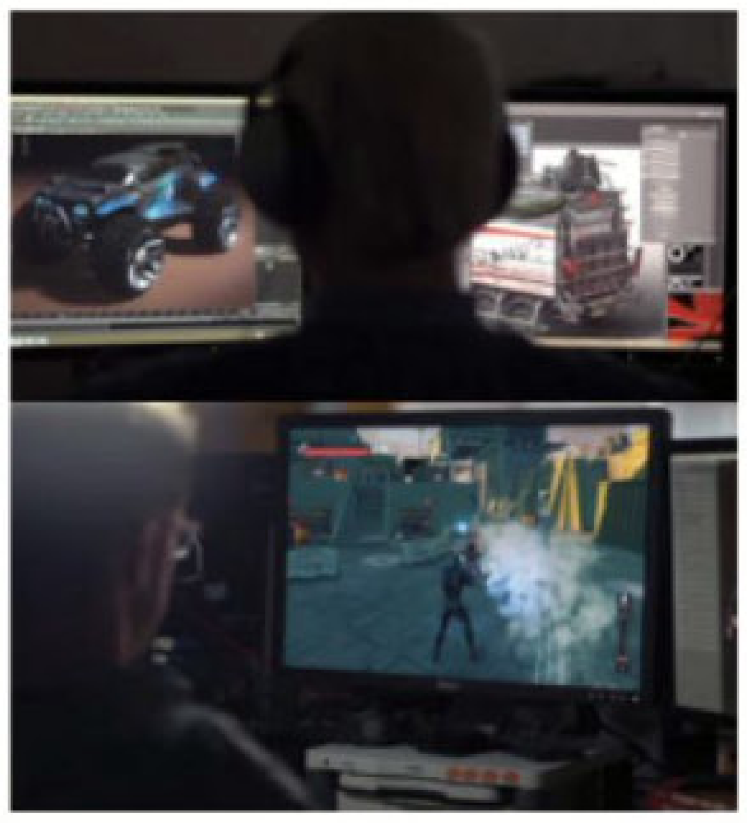
At this point it all sounds promising, but hardly groundbreaking. *Battlefield* has been doing this for years, hasn't it? *Rainbow Six: Siege* appears to be doing something similar. Except, there's a twist in the form of cloud processing, which changes the potential for scale completely. *Crackdown* will not be limited to the 8-core CPU or 1.31 teraflops of graphics processing inside the Xbox One's ample frame. This game will be drawing from Microsoft's intimidating Azure Cloud server network, an interconnected web of server farms spread across the globe offering cloud computing services for companies, office applications and increasingly games. 2014's *Titanfall* already felt the benefit of running on the Microsoft Azure server network and its 27 data centres around the world. It just needed to reach out to the nearest server cluster and find some space to host a clean, strong connection. It worked a treat.

"Unlike other games, this wall has compute power and memory on demand," reveals Jones as he demonstrates how destructible *Crackdown 3* is in a tech demo. "Each single bullet will take away a little bit of the geometry. And everything is physical. In true *Crackdown* style if I want to be at the top of a building, any building, and create a little sniper nest and shoot my friends from there so they can hardly see me, then that's pretty exciting. That's the kind of thing we can do." And if you wanted to shoot a metal railing off the side of a building and then wield it, swinging it at the heads of gang members, that's just fine too.

Chances are you've seen some of the more bombastic responses to the latest *Crackdown 3* tech demonstrations with claims of 13 times the power of the Xbox One being harnessed for the game. The reality is a more modest than that, but no less impressive. "It's not the whole performance of the box, it's just how much we would normally use in terms of physics," clarifies Jones. What Microsoft Azure really gives Cloudgine access to then is (at present) 13 times the physics computing power of what the Xbox One would typically reserve for such data. Not as sexy, but theoretically that could just be the beginning of what this extra processing potential brings to Xbox One.



Dave Jones founded DMA Design, maker of *Lemmings* and *Grand Theft Auto*.



Crackdown 3 is actually a three-studio production with Cloudgine, Reagent and Sheffield-based Sumo Digital.

"Typical multiplayer games run on a server and if you're lucky you get one server for your game, but most servers actually share games," Jones explains as he switches to a debug mode on the demo to show us how the different servers interact with the online game world. "What you see here is that all the different colours are actually different cloud servers. So the cyan and the green are actually on physically different servers. We can just start to add servers and expand the world and make sure everything is at this level of detail. The system is so smart that you'll see cyan blocks, as they cross physical server boundaries, change colour, as they move across servers."

"Unlike other games, this wall has compute power and memory on demand"

So, as you begin to destroy a 30-storey building, one server might be handling the debris and calculating impact while another server picks up the calculations for how this incoming impact will affect the glass tower that stands next to it. And all with no frame-rate drop.

"You'll see everything is physical, there's cascade damage, everything hits everything else," Jones continues. "The more damage we start to do, we'll start to use more and more power. Let's say we do enough damage to this tower on the right that if we keep shooting the base



here eventually that should fall down, exactly as players, I think, would want it to work and expect to happen.

"So the whole thing will fall and everything on it is physical, it will hit the ground, it will damage things farther away, etc. Even when it's on the ground it's fully physical; you can stand on it and climb up." And as we watch the devastation crank up we can see, thanks to a neat debug HUD option, how much additional processing power is being brought to bear. The bar for the Xbox One is full pretty quickly, and each additional bar represents an equal amount of processing from the cloud. One by one, more bars appear on the screen as the debris falls and scatters, destroying and taking chunks off other buildings.

And now the gameplay potential of this technology, as well as its obvious compatibility with the spirit of *Crackdown*, begins to emerge. For the ultimate sandbox experience, what could be better than a city you can raze to the ground? "*Crackdown* was a game about doing things the way you want to do them, so imagine that there was a kingpin who lived at the top of this tower and was very, very heavily defended. I could, as a *Crackdown* player, use agility and try and climb my way up to try and kill him or we could get together and say 'Screw that' and just blow the base of the tower up and bring him and the whole tower down." It's essentially the CGI trailer we saw a year ago, but made into real, demonstrable gameplay. How often do we get to say that a CGI teaser trailer actually delivered on its promise?

Delivering some semblance of realism is something this development team is really pinning itself to, albeit in a tech-fantasy future setting. Because this game world is a tangible one with a consistent physics engine, if you want to make everything destructible you also need to make sure it can stand up in the first place. "You have to re-imagine gaming in a respect because this whole building here is actually built physically," says Jones as the scale of the endeavour Cloudgine and Reagent has taken on begins to truly dawn on us. "Once again, building are usually just put together by geometry and they're just a picture; they're fake. If we want to make a fully destructible world we would expect players to say, 'If that's fully destructible, I want to shoot out this whole base and I want the whole »

HOW THE AZURE CLOUD WORKS

A quick guide to how your Xbox One will harness the cloud

STANDARD SERVER



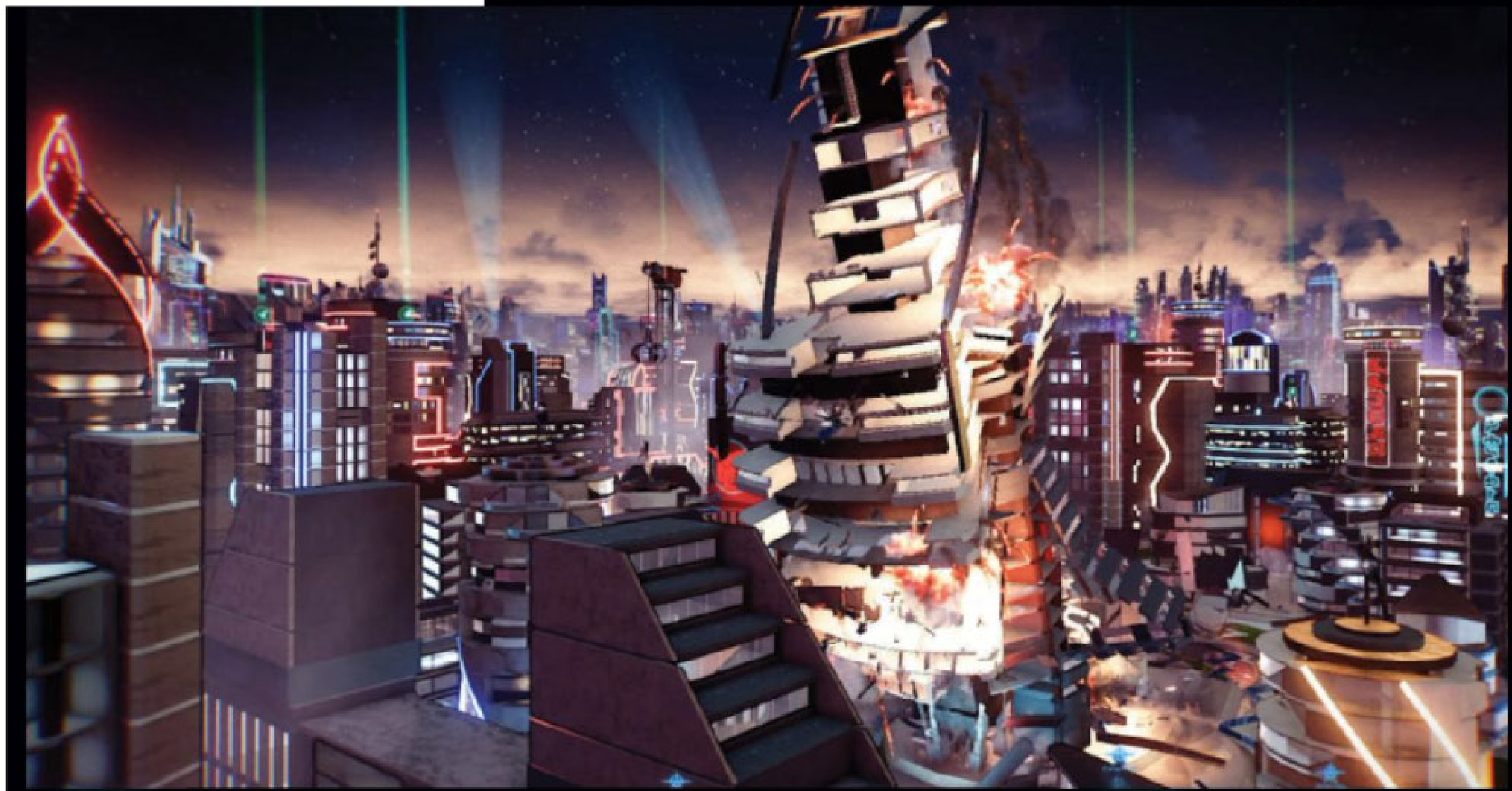
Typically when communicating with a server for online play your multiplayer match will be sharing a server with other players, all being hosted at the same time.

THE AZURE CLOUD





Thanks to its server farms, Microsoft can dedicate several servers to *Crackdown 3* matches rather than just a portion of one server. That means these servers can also handle calculations for physics processing.



Whether on rooftops or street level, this series has always packed in the detail to give its city as much character as possible. Everything we've seen so far suggests that remains the case for this new location.

5 CORE ELEMENTS OF CRACKDOWN

Not sure what to expect from a Crackdown game? Here's what you need to know

1. SUPER AGENTS



The Agency isn't just a bunch of hapless cops trying to keep the streets safe, you're essentially a superhero, except without a lot of the moral quandaries most of them have to deal with. As you level up you're able to lift cars, run at incredible speeds and leap to massive heights.

2. TRANSFORMING CARS



Just as your Agent changes appearance and looks more superhero-like as you progress, so your Agency vehicles evolve as you improve your driving ability. In the original the supercar turned into a virtual Batmobile and the offroad SUV could start driving up walls.

3. CLIMBING



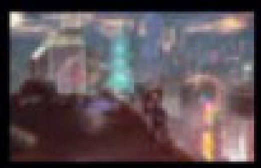
As your skills improved and you could leap to greater heights, scaling large buildings became a particular delight. Rather than inching your way up as with *Assassin's Creed*, you could fling yourself up the side of buildings. Climbing the Agency tower in particular was a feat of agility.

4. EXPLOSIONS



The element of *Crackdown* best showcased in *Crackdown 3* so far, the pyrotechnics of the original game were fantastic and got better the more you used them. New explosive options opened up as you got more kills using them. The carnage you could create was fantastic.

5. AGILITY ORBS



Fans tend to spend a lot of time talking about how much fun they had hunting down Agility Orbs and hearing their familiar 'ping' sound effect. It was a great incentive and reward system as greater agility lead to the ability to collect more orbs. They're already confirmed for *Crackdown 3*.



As with previous games you'll need to disrupt the criminal network by taking out its key figureheads and in some cases replacing them so that the Agency takes over any supply chains, finally conquering the city.



» thing to fall over with my friends on the top and they should fall down with it'. And we say 'Absolutely'. This building here has been built physically, so it's clad in concrete, steel and glass and it has a steel infrastructure that runs through it. To do that we had to make that building stand up under physics." And then apply that to the building on the entire city…

It means we might need to think a little differently about how we interact with the game too. Things won't be as simple as we first think. "Now, this building, the way that it's constructed, it has a lot of weight on the left hand side, the way that the architect has designed this. You would expect that when it finally falls down that it would fall to the left, but once again that's decided by physics. If you did enough damage and stripped it away, it can fall any direction you want. From a gameplay perspective that's very different."

Ultimately, and excitingly for those of us who fell in love with this game, it feels like the original *Crackdown* first did. While many will still only remember Realtime World's sandbox as the delivery system for a *Halo 3* beta, those of us who played and immersed ourselves in Pacific City, levelling up our agents, gathering agility orbs and taking out gang leaders will remember how it embraced chaos. Gang leaders would be surrounded by guards in heavily defended towers of caves, but you could just as easily find a sewer pipe that snuck you through the back as blast your way in from the front. It was very loose and permissive of player experimentation. This even extended to a *Keys To The City* DLC release that opened up some debug-style options to really let you loose.

All of this new server-driven destruction has been confirmed as being for online multiplayer only, since bringing down every tower would rather ruin the fun of orb-hunting in single-player as well as defeat the objective of 'Saving the city'. That's not to say that the solo and co-op portions of *Crackdown 3* will be without some destructive potency, just heavily limited so as not to be game-breaking. It has however been hinted by the development team that a game-opening destructive mode might be made available later, much like the original game's DLC so that you can enjoy some solitary or co-op city-levelling action.

Right now though, *Crackdown 3* is still some way away and there's much to be finalised. While Dave Jones' demonstration has been impressive, it remains only a demonstration for the time being. "So we're doing a lot of destruction for destruction's sake here, but obviously this is a tremendous technology test bed that I believe has a lot of huge gaming opportunities for how we can change multiplayer gaming. How we can make worlds much more physical. And, creatively, how we can start to use destruction in the multiplayer game that we're building." How this will all be applied to game modes and given objectives is to be decided between now and a summer 2016 multiplayer beta. We've seen some brief glimpses at how vehicles will once again transform and level up instantly depending on the driving skill of your agent and we've seen some of the insane weapons we might get to use, but there's much still to be confirmed and clarified. For the time being Jones leaves us with a small caveat so we don't get too carried away. "This is not fully representative of the gameplay," he warns. "It's just showing you the possibilities of what we can do." But with possibilities this impressive, it's hard to believe this could end up as anything less than spectacular.

> "You'll see everything is physical, there's cascade damage, everything hits everything else"



As with the last two games, *Crackdown 3* is being developed in Dundee, this time by Reagent Games.



gearing up for battle

"Some people think of themselves as software developers or videogame-makers," explains Gearbox Software's co-founder and studio head, Randy Pitchford. "We kind of think on a higher level, which is about creating fun, creating joy and happiness. That's really what entertainment is all about."

All it takes is a cursory look through the Gearbox back catalogue to see that Pitchford isn't simply gushing to us; the studio only (currently) has two of its own IPs to its name – *Brothers In Arms* and *Borderlands* – and both managed to carve out a successful niche within the industry and resound with both the critical and consumer fanbases. But Gearbox started as a much smaller venture – a company established by five friends with a desire to work on the games that mattered to them.

"The founders of Gearbox were myself, Brian Martel, Steven Bahl, Landon Montgomery, and Rob Hieronimous," Pitchford tells us, going back to the company's founding in 1999. "And we knew a few things at the beginning. One was that we were making a game, that's in our blood, that's the only thing we can imagine doing. And that, for us, it's about creating entertainment: we wanted to ship, we wanted to make things and send them off to be judged, and learn from each step and just keep making things[...] I mean, our first project was *Half-Life: Opposing Force*, and that was such a cool way to start. Such a *fun* way to start."



● Randy Pitchford (above) has been working in the industry for over 16 years - working at 3D Realms on *Duke Nukem 3D* before establishing Gearbox Software.

Everyone at Gearbox in the early days was au fait with games programming and the science behind the art. In Dallas, Texas, where Gearbox began operating from, there was a budding development scene around Pitchford and his colleagues. Pitchford and Martel had worked at 3D Realms together, and Montgomery joined the team from Bethesda Softworks. But it was at Gearbox that they really started to hone their craft.

"You know, I think I built about a quarter of the levels in *Opposing Force* myself, and I directed and produced and wrote most of the game. And when we shipped the game, I think we were 16 people, but the bulk of the actual development work was done by about a dozen. And that was awesome, because everybody had to wear a lot of hats, we were all doing tons of



CONTROVERSY, INNOVATION, BORDERLANDS, HALF-LIFE, ALIENS, DUKE NUKEM AND REINVENTING THE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER. THIS IS GEARBOX. THIS IS RANDY PITCHFORD





things. It was a pretty big game. It was fun. As we did the *Half-Life* stuff and started getting our sea legs, we wanted to really figure out what our studio path was here."

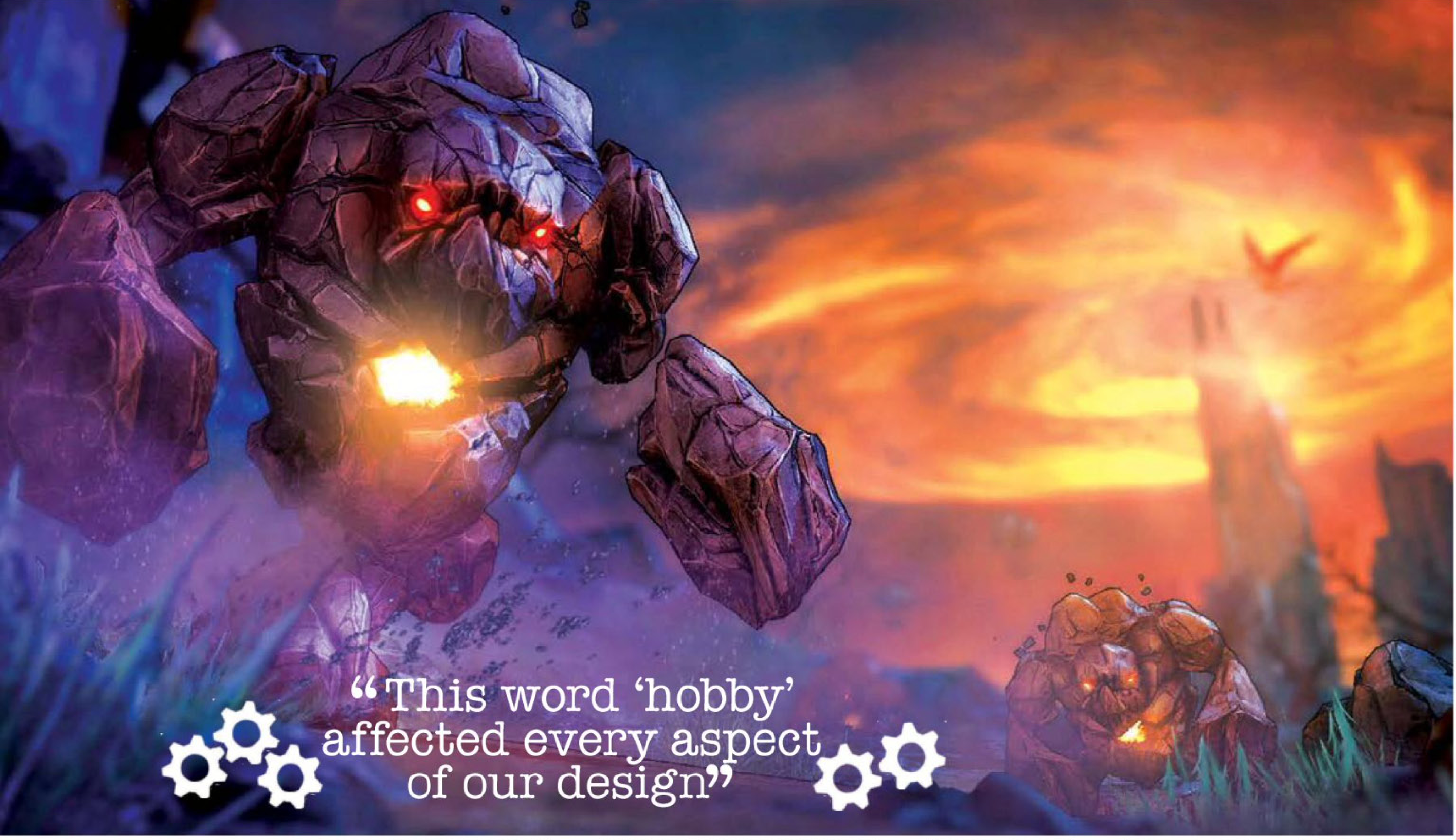
This established what Gearbox's modus operandi would be going forward – Pitchford and his colleagues were development ronin: warriors without masters. Having made a name for itself working on *Half-Life* (an incredibly esteemed property for such a fledgling studio), Gearbox wanted to court various publishers and properties, looking to learn as much about development as it could, looking to, as Pitchford puts it, 'understand the landscape'.

"Doing James Bond was awesome, because I got to work with Electronic Arts and they were number *one* at the time," reveals Pitchford. "And doing *Tony Hawk* was awesome because I got to work with Activision, and they were number *two* at the time. And in both of those cases, those franchises were very important to them."

At the time, EA didn't have any shooters in the market – and this was 2002, where the FPS was about to go nuclear. Pitchford relished the opportunity to help the biggest games publisher of the time get a foothold in an emerging genre, and it was Gearbox's experience on this game that would lay the foundations for many of the studio's future successes. "I got to learn about what it was like to work with EA, I got to do it in an important game to EA, and I got to mess around with the James Bond franchise, which was *awesome*," he laughs. "It was a fantasy."

After some work on porting *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* to PC and Mac for Activision, Gearbox landed its next big fish: *Halo*. Gearbox helped Microsoft port *Halo* to PC once the game shifted its development focus to its new console, the Xbox. By now, then, Gearbox had worked on projects on the PS2, the Xbox, the PC and Mac… it had its fingers in many pies, ready to make its move on the industry.

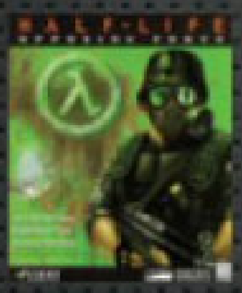
"Yeah, it was like we were the velociraptors testing the fences, trying to figure out where the strong points were and the weak spots were," Pitchford laughs. "We were learning about the industry while building success and building experience for ourselves. It worked out in pretty much precisely the way I hoped »



> "This word 'hobby' affected every aspect of our design"

A history of gearbox

1999



Gearbox Software formed / *Half-Life: Opposing Force* released



2000

***Half-Life: Counter-Strike* released**

2001

***Half-Life: Blue Shift* released**
***Half-Life* (PS2) released**

2002

***Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* (PC) released**
***James Bond 007: NightFire* released**

» it would in that it taught us a lot. And I'm grateful for those lessons. We'd be a very different company today if we hadn't had those lessons."

Those lessons led to the creation of Gearbox's first IP: *Brothers In Arms*. By 2005, Gearbox had assured itself enough critical acclaim to begin courting publishers for its own product. "With the successful games [we'd produced so far], we were able to build a nest egg and we decided to try something original," Pitchford explains. "Brian Martel and I had this dream to do a war game, so we started that. We actually started it with Microsoft, but they were going through some changes – when Ed Fries left Microsoft Game Studios – and we were kind of left in this weird limbo."

Pitchford has never *just* been a developer – but rather, a fully-rounded studio head, taking it upon himself to organise deals, manage the financial side of the business, and look after the studio's own IP. He studied law at UCLA while working as a magician in the eveningsand that mix of showmanship and intricate knowledge of 'the system' has helped him power the Gearbox engine for years.

"I had an option with my agreement where I could buy the rights back from Microsoft, and shop it on the open market, so I chose that option and we shopped it around. Ultimately, Ubisoft won. And I was excited for Ubisoft to do it because I believed the game would be strong in Europe, and Ubisoft was the best-positioned European distributor [at the time]."



● Gearbox stress-tests its games diligently – that's how *Borderlands* has managed to stay so bug-free throughout its life.



● Pitchford is a popular figure on social media, though sometimes his passion for Gearbox can be misinterpreted...

Pitchford saw that Ubisoft was aggressively expanding – this was in 2005, shortly after Ubisoft's massive success with *Splinter Cell*. Pitchford identified that Ubisoft was going to ride this momentum to invest in other IPs, and capitalised on that. But the deal went better than expected – Ubisoft had recently expanded into China with Ubisoft Shanghai, and Gearbox's pitch won the studio access to this new developer (who was already well-versed in PS2 development). In one fell swoop, Gearbox had established its first IP, and found a team that could port its own IP onto the biggest market in gaming.

"None of the other publishers could offer that, so that started a really wonderful partnership with Ubisoft, which lasted quite a long time, and we did several *Brothers In Arms* games together," explains Pitchford. The games sold well – the first title was met with critical acclaim, and fairly soon a huge (and loyal) fanbase had sprung up around the franchise.

B*rothers In Arms: Road To Hill 30* went against the grain of the other World War II FPS games that were flooding the market – mainly because it was based on a true story, and revelled in its authenticity. The development team recreated an entire aerial map taken from Normandy just before the D-Day landings. It was a game that merged cinematic storytelling with competent FPS mechanics, emphasising tactics and strategy over the run-and-gun template that had dominated the industry up until this point. It was Gearbox's way of declaring 'Here we are, world.'

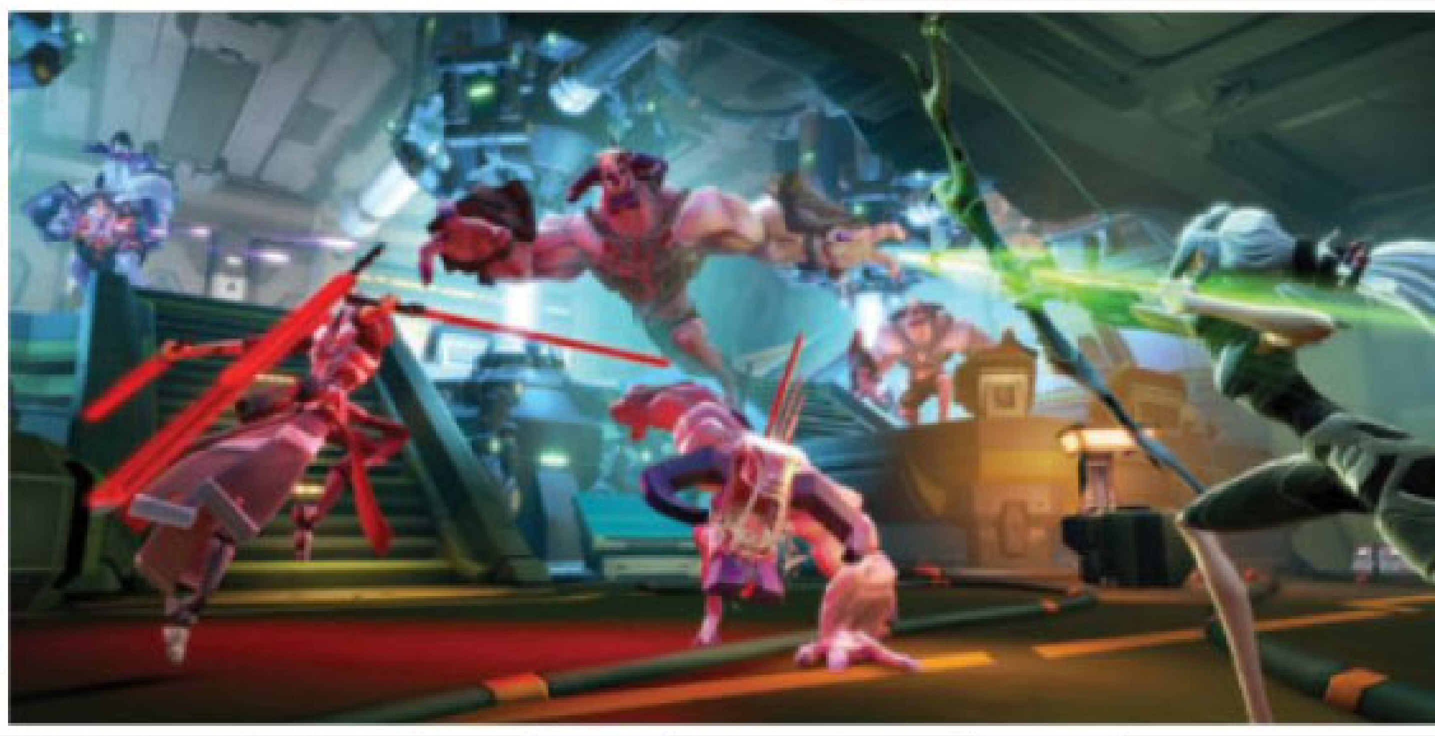




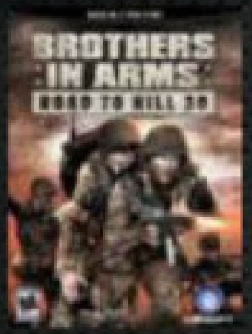
● *Brothers In Arms* took a lot of research to make it so authentic.



● Gearbox has continued to grow since its founding in 1999.



2003
***Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* released**
***Halo: CE* (PC) released**



2005
***Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* released**
***Brothers in Arms: Earned In Blood* released**

2008
***Samba de Amigo* (Wii) released**
***Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* released**

2009
Gearbox celebrates 10th anniversary

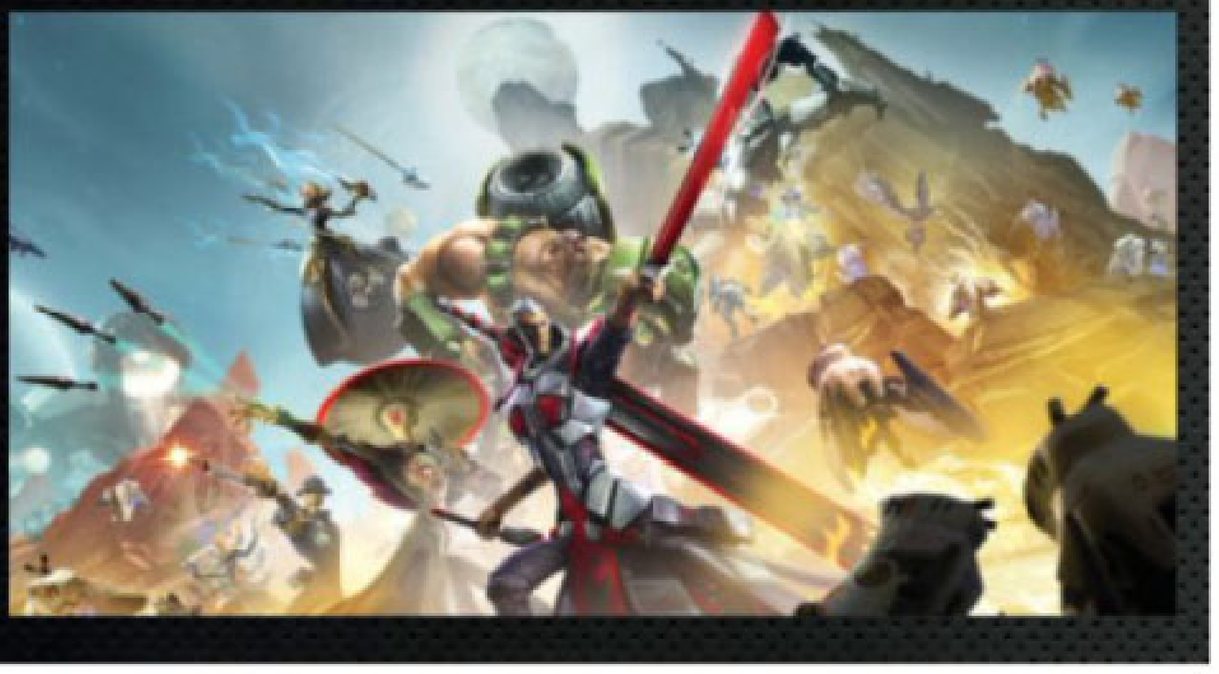


2009
***Borderlands* released**

2010
Gearbox acquires *Duke Nukem*

Looking forward

Gearbox might be a studio somewhat defined by its successful *Borderlands* series, but Pitchford doesn't want to rest on his laurels when it comes to pushing the studio forward. "It's kind of hard to explain exactly what it is, but I feel like we're at the same spot that we were at with *Borderlands* when we were talking about it before it launched," he says of his relationship with *Battleborn* right now. "We're screaming from the highest mountain, saying 'We think you're going to like this!', but people are like 'We'll believe it when we see it…' [laughs]"





"It still baffles me, you know," Pitchford reflects. "I think we were 40 people when we shipped the first *Brothers In Arms*, and we got over 90 reviews at launch. And Ubisoft sold 3.2 million units, which was just… I mean, both of those metrics just destroyed the first couple of *Medal Of Honor* games and the first couple of *Call Of Duty* games. To be newcomers against these giants and to actually *beat* them was… [laughs] It was hard to believe, but there we were. So now we're on the map, now we had credibility as original game developers *and* as IP builders."

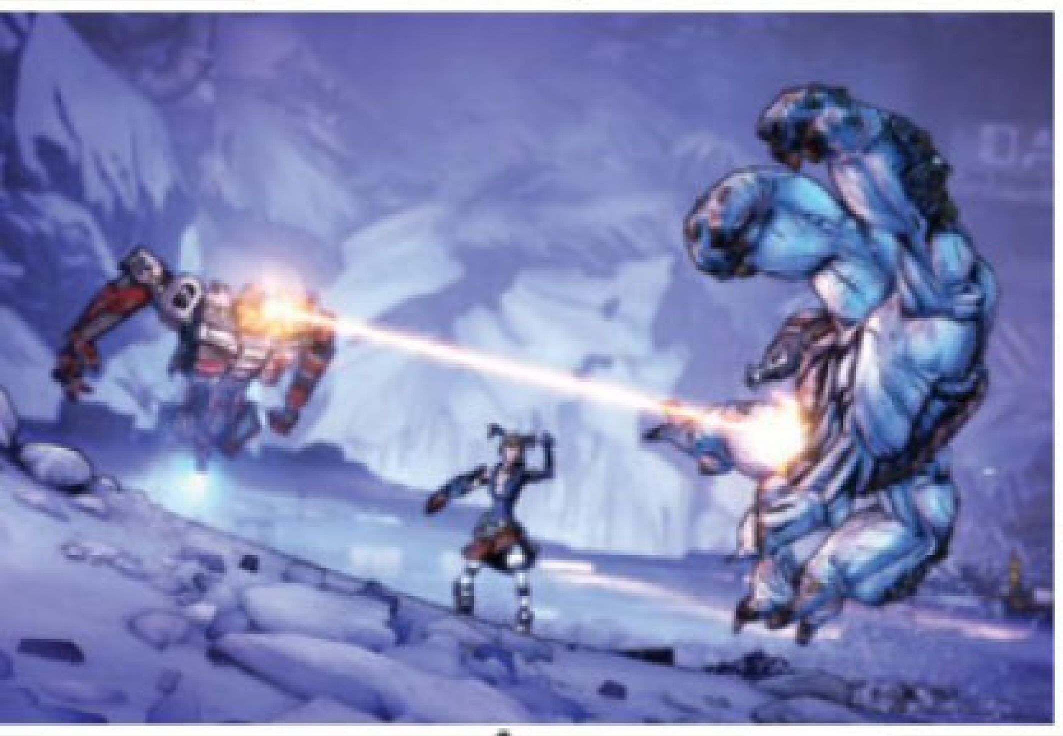
Two years after *Brothers In Arms* launched, Pitchford was on the map. Gearbox had enough capital in its coffers to begin acquiring licences – 2007 brought *Aliens* and crime drama *Heat* into the studio. The same year, *Borderlands* was announced – it was the next logical step in the Gearbox journey, and of course, Pitchford had his finger firmly on the pulse of the industry.

"When we started *Borderlands 1*, there was this buzzword going around the industry at the time, which was 'games as a service'. As mobile first appeared, and some of the online games on PC, and I thought that, as a customer, I am completely uninterested in a 'service', right? But then I thought: what is that really?

"The 'service' is just one path to creating a hobby, so I started chanting around the studio 'It's not games as a service, games are hobbies. Hobby, hobby, hobby'. So this word 'hobby' became kind of a mantra and affected *every* aspect of our design. So while on one level there's a consumable story, there's a completely different level where there's a hobby aspect to the »



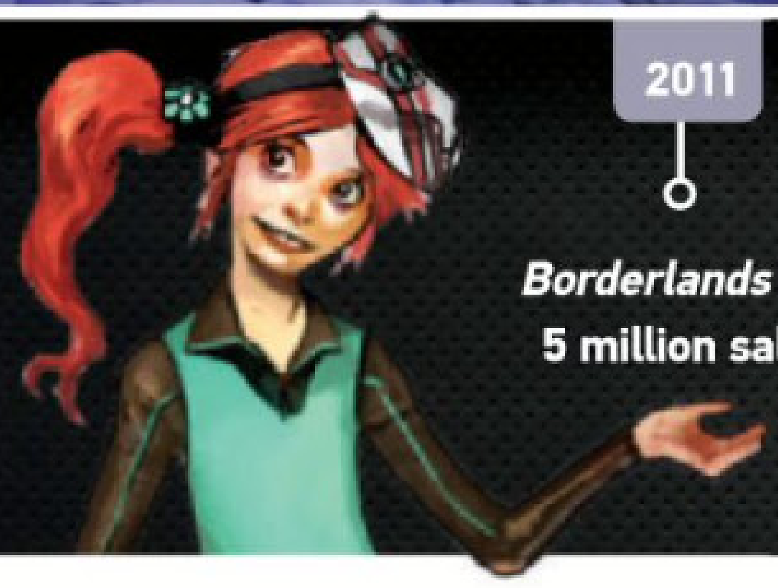
Borderlands helped define Gearbox as a triple-A industry leader.







Pitchford is keen to keep the Gearbox culture level and fair.



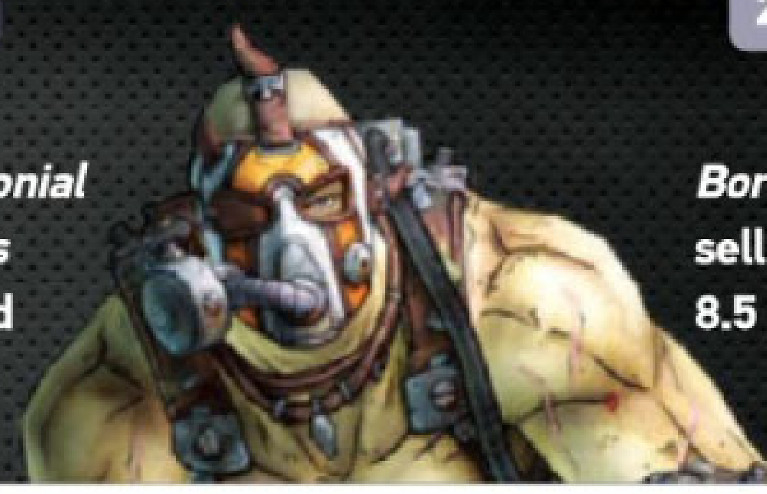
2011 – ***Borderlands* hits 5 million sales**



2011 – ***Duke Nukem Forever* released**

2012 – ***Borderlands 2* released**

2013 – ***Aliens: Colonial Marines* released**



2014 – ***Borderlands 2* sells more than 8.5 million copies**

"Every game is shipped with compromise"



game, which is everywhere from collecting all of the loot to growing your character [comes from]."

Borderlands managed to fill a gap in the market nobody knew they wanted filling. The saturation of the first-person shooter was still prevalent, and *Borderlands* came in with this subtle western sci-fi art direction, looking like a graphic novel made flesh, and proved that a shooter didn't have to hold your hand through drab corridors for six hours and leave you out in the cold… no, there was more to the genre than that. *Borderlands* took all the addictive qualities of hardcore role-playing games (read: *Diablo*) and fused them with shooters, giving more credence to the reputation Gearbox was earning as a convention-defying rebel in the industry.

This reputation was partly built on from 2008's release of a Dreamcast-to-Wii port of *Samba De Amigo* – something totally at odds with Gearbox's now shooter-only output – and the acquisition of the first licence Pitchford ever worked on back at 3D Worlds: *Duke Nukem*. *Borderlands* continued to entice gamers around the world and excitement about Gearbox's creative output continued to soar. By 2011, Gearbox was ready to unleash its next project on the world: *Duke Nukem Forever*. Unfortunately, this return to licensed games didn't further the momentum Gearbox had created for itself, and – instead – actually ended up lacing the studio's meteoric rise with a controversial twang. To this day, Gearbox and Pitchford are both held responsible for the 'death' of both *Aliens* and *Duke Nukem*, but that's something Pitchford remains acutely aware of.

"I was completely deluded about *Duke Nukem Forever*" Pitchford admitted to us, "I loved the game and I thought people were going to think it was great, and they just *crushed* it. I mean, some people liked it, but a lot of people crushed it. It's a weird thing." Pitchford's passion for the game was evident to us when we were speaking to him, and it makes sense. After all, it was *Duke Nukem 3D* that was Pitchford's introduction to game development at 3D Realms, when he was a graduate fresh out of law school. The same passion can't be seen in Pitchford when it comes to Gearbox's other controversial release, though…

"Every game is shipped with compromise," Pitchford explains, when we ask about *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' disastrous reception back in 2013. "There's no doubt about it. You're both proud of this moment, which you're delivering something, but you're terrified. I thought we were heading into disaster [with *Aliens*], and it just shows how easy it is to be unobjective when you ship. I thought there was a risk of real disaster. My on-paper prediction for critical review for that nailed it on the head, but there was a part of me that was like 'Fuuuck…' because I knew



● DLC in the form of new playable characters was a huge success for *Borderlands 2*.





- **2014** – Gearbox celebrates 15th anniversary
- **2014** – *Battleborn* announced
- **2014** – *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* released
- **2014** – *Homeworld Remastered Collection* released
- **2015** – *Borderlands: The Handsome Collection* released
- **2015** – *Homeworld Remastered Collection Retail Box* released

all these things that weren't quite right, that I wished were better. I felt like the plane was going to crash into the mountain."

And crash it did – it's fair to assume that if *Borderlands 2* hadn't been occupying the market's attention, the release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* could have brought Gearbox down with it. But the studio persisted, severing ties with Sega (publishers of *Aliens*) and continuing its work with 2K, who had proven to be a successful collaborative match with Gearbox's own IP.

Enter *Battleborn* – the next step in the Gearbox story, the unwritten chapter Pitchford is just beginning to explore. "I think there's a lot of things we didn't do that great in *Borderlands* because we were on the vanguard, trying things we've never done before," Pitchford explains, "and some of the lessons that came from that are being applied to *Battleborn* so if we do it right, it'll be even more of a hobby experience and that's what we're shooting for." It comes back to that motto that Pitchford told us about earlier – *Battleborn* doesn't want to be a service to the player, it wants to introduce itself as a virtual way of life to them, basically.

"*Battleborn* is going to ship with 25 characters. *Borderlands* had four. [laughs] So it's a massive investment towards that [style of gameplay]. And the characters do way more than the *Borderlands* characters do. They're more unique and have more diverse capabilities than any of the *Borderlands* characters did. And I love that, but there's also a lot of other components, gear and loot that you'll win that will be relevant to how you'll build your characters, and other meta-game aspects we're still tweaking. I want to be careful about what specific promises I make at this stage, but we're applying a huge number of lessons that we took from our experience there."

We asked Pitchford whether he felt pressure from Blizzard's upcoming FPS, *Overwatch*, which looks like it'll be a direct rival to this new quick-and-fast, arena shooting that *Battleborn* is built on. "No, I mean, I think the things that are the most awesome things in the competition kind of excite me. Like now, with *Battleborn*, when *Overwatch* was announced, I literally danced on my desk. It was *so* validating, it was like 'Oh man, now there's someone else pushing in a kind of similar direction', And that's going to help, right? Because there's going to be more gravity around it, there's going to be a discussion around it."

A lot of people don't seem to like Randy Pitchford – they see him as a man that's lied and deceived his fans, his customers, and Gearbox has inevitably shouldered some of the negative press that comes with this cult of personality. But after sitting with him in his hotel room for an hour, chatting about the history of Gearbox and the people behind it, we've seen a different side of Randy Pitchford – he's been with Gearbox for 16 years, and not one of those years has jaded him, made him cynical, though he has more right than most to have been ground down. He remains charismatic, passionate and fully invested in the culture of videogames.

"And, dude, we're just getting started!" he tells us with a smile, right at the end of our interview.

'Popcorn shooters'

Pitchford told us that he struggles finding time to find all the games he 'needs' to play. So, naturally, we asked what were the games he didn't *need* to play, but *wanted* to play? "I, um… I *love* big games," he laughs. "I tend to like popcorn shooters and big triple-A games. I love popcorn shooters. I admit it; I'll just consume what other people deem simple and common. But it feels really good to shoot something and watch it pop. [laughs] I don't know why I like that so much…"



BRING IT BACK!

AFTER THE SURPRISE RE-INTRODUCTION OF SHENMUE TO THE GAMING WORLD, WE STARTED THINKING 'IF THAT'S POSSIBLE, WHAT ELSE COULD WE BRING BACK WITH ENOUGH FAN-POWER?' WE BEGAN TO THINK ABOUT WHICH GAMES SHOULD BE RERELEASED, AND WHO'D BE THE BEST DEVELOPER TO DO IT

1. F-ZERO

Last Release: **F-Zero Climax (2004)**
Dream developer: **Criterion**

Why:



F-ZERO SET the standard for the racing genre, outright inventing the 'futuristic racer' in the videogame space – going on to inspire *WipEout* and *Daytona USA*. It's been due a rebirth for a while, and despite some loving nods to the franchise in the most recent *Mario Kart*, we're still eagerly waiting a *true* successor to the *F-Zero* throne. Enter Criterion, master of the modern racer, parent of *Burnout* and surrogate family to *Need For Speed*. Criterion would do justice to the rich legacy of *F-Zero*, making a blistering, futuristic racer with through-the-roof production values and gameplay like we might have seen in old Criterion game, *AirBlade*.



Likelihood: 50%

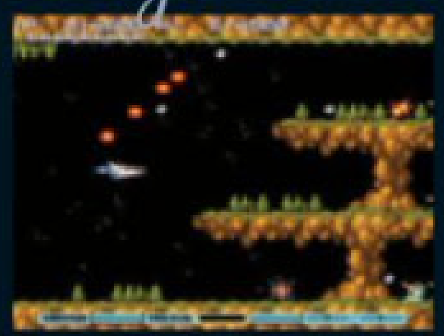
We may well see another *F-Zero* game surface on the NX in future, but Nintendo is being very tight-lipped about it for now.



2. GRADIUS

Last Release: **Gradius the Slot (2011)**
Dream developer: **Housemarque**

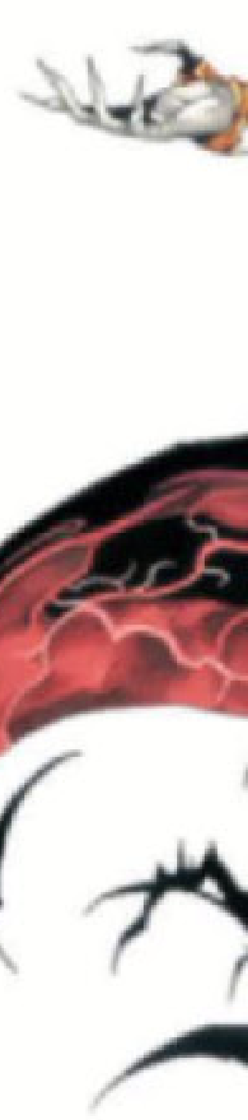
Why:



THE HORIZONTALLY-scrolling shoot-'em-up that introduced the world to the Vic Viper was infamously tough – an arcade shooter that perfected the balance between skill-based play and coin-hungry cabinets. It set off a trend in ultra-hard shooters and continued on as a franchise for seven generations, inspiring currently operating developers like Hideki Kamiya and Hideo Kojima. We'd like to see Housemarque give the series a go – it's the undisputed champion of the current shoot-'em-up scene, and we'd be interested to see the developer step out of its arena-shooter comfort zone and experiment with something with a little more structured progression.

Likelihood: 30%

The last three attempts at resurrecting *Gradius* have totally failed during development, so we're not sure if we'll ever see another one surface. Konami retains the licence, though, so it might still happen.





3. DIDDY KONG RACING

Last Release: **Diddy Kong Racing DS (2007)**
Dream developer: **Sumo Digital**

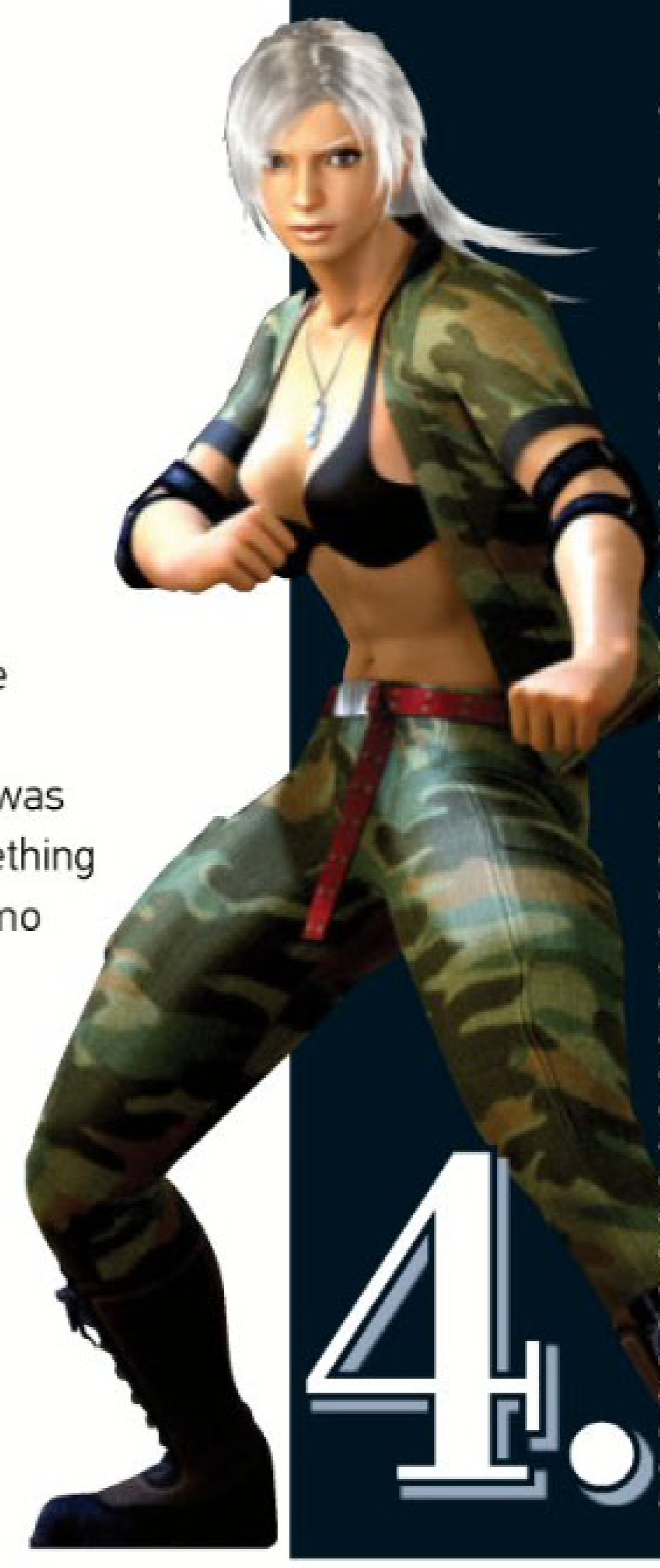
Why:



WHEN THE game was first released in 1997, it was the fastest-selling game in the world – selling just under 800,000 copies in its first two weeks on the shelves. It was most notable for its distinctive adventure mode – something the karting games of the time didn't really have. Considering how well Sumo Digital have done with the adventure side of the *LittleBigPlanet 3* and the karting of *Sonic And Sega All-Stars Transformed*, we think the developer would be a perfect match for a potential reboot... especially when you consider Sumo is a British studio and could spiritually replicate what Rare did in making a Western Nintendo karter in the first place!

Likelihood: 15%

Who can predict Nintendo? Movement appears to be starting up on NX announcements, so maybe we'll hear about a *Diddy Kong* game for that platform.



4. VIRTUA FIGHTER

Last Release: **Virtua Fighter 5 Final Showdown (2012)**
Dream developer: **AM2**

Why:



THE GRANDDADDY of 3D fighting games has been unfairly ignored by Sega for the last few years, treated only to a few slipshod upgrades and rereleases, letting genre rivals *Tekken* and *SoulCalibur* run rampant with sequel after sequel, unchallenged. The incredible realism and technical proficiency that went into making the games still holds up today, and we'd love to see a new-gen interpretation of the tournament-style rules. To that end, we wouldn't want to give the franchise to anyone other than its spiritual parent – we've got Namco Bandai iterating the 3D fighting game in its own way over on the other side of the industry, if we had AM2 bringing it's own take to the fighter (with its amazing technical proficiency), then *everyone* would win

Likelihood: 60%

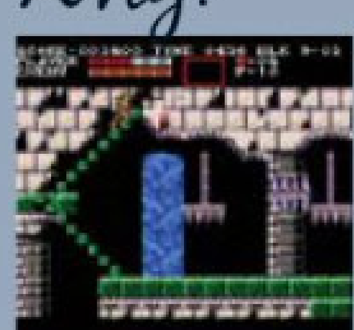
Sega has promised to learn from its recent acquisition of Atlus about how to cater to fans... but when it said that, all we heard was 'You might get a new *Virtua Fighter*'.

5. CASTLEVANIA

Last Release: **Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2 (2014)**
Dream developer: **Ska Studios**



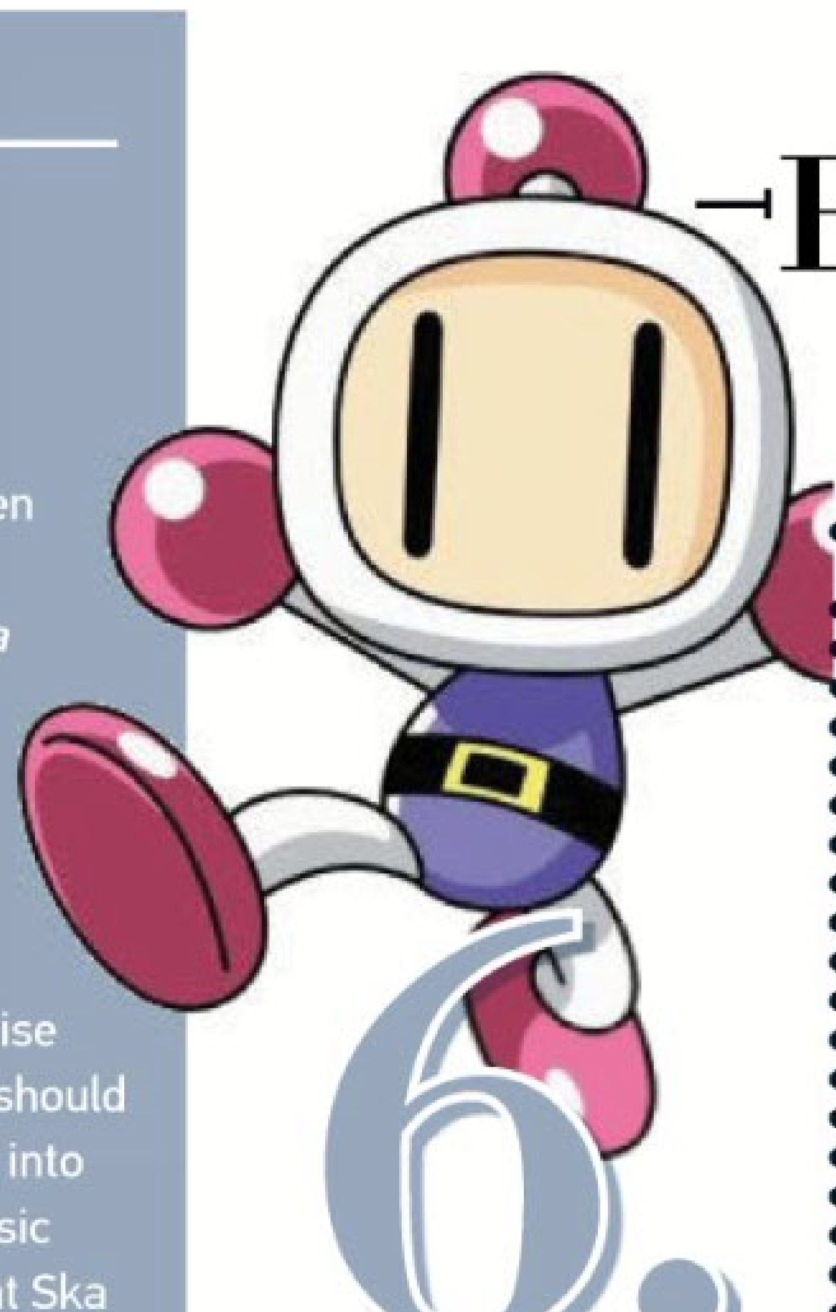
Why:



NOW THAT Koji Igarashi has taken to Kickstarter to make the *true* spiritual successor to *Castlevania* (and received funding to the tune of $5.5 million for his efforts), Konami must have been shown that there's most certainly an appetite for the original -vania style of game alive in our collective minds. It's all well and good having these cinematic iterations of the franchise in the *Lords Of Shadow* games, but maybe Konami should consider doing a *Tomb Raider* and separating the IP into two halves: the 'modern' portion, and the more classic version for fans of the legacy games. We believe that Ska Studios – under the leadership of James Silva – would do great justice to the series: with game series like *The Dishwasher* and *Charlie Murder* under its belt, we *know* the studio would nail the dark tone and 2D platforming portions of the series... it just might take Ska about 12 years to actually complete.

Likelihood: 90%

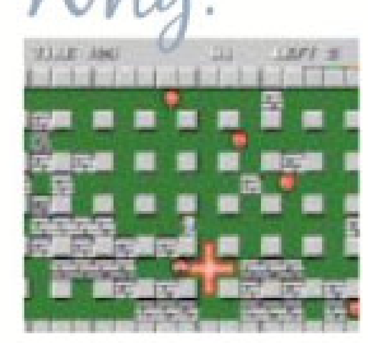
Konami would be remiss if it didn't bring back the *Castlevania* series, especially since *Bloodstained* received so much attention when it hit Kickstarter.



6. BOMBERMAN

Last Release: **Bomberman iOS (2014)**
Dream developer: **Nintendo EAD**

Why:



HUDSON SOFT'S maze-based party game favourite has been missing in action for a while (on consoles, at least). Another licence Konami managed to acquire – then ignore – when it picked up Hudson Soft in 2012, *Bomberman* clearly has an audience waiting for him when he makes his return: you don't get put into over 70 games without a pretty devout fanbase on the other side. We actually think a licence with as much legacy and impact as *Bomberman* would really suit Nintendo: stylistically, *Bomberman* fits in with the wider Nintendo roster, he'd make a *great* amiibo, and Nintendo EAD put fun and purity of the game first – more than any other developer out there. That's what *Bomberman* deserves, that's what *Bomberman needs.*

Likelihood: 25%

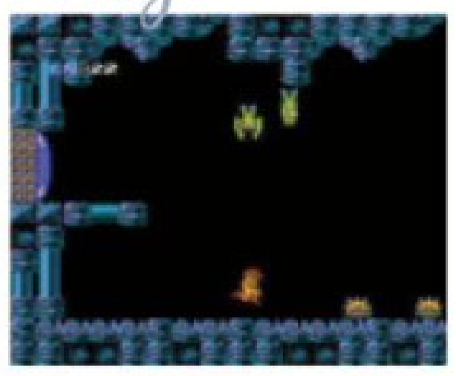
Who knows if Konami even wants to rescue Bomberman, but we'd like to think the publisher would: if nothing else, he's a proven money-maker, and has been for years.



7. METROID

Last Release: **Metroid: Other M (2010)**
Dream developer: **Moon Studios**

Why:



NINTENDO MAY have graced us with some movement in the *Metroid* series with the announcement of *Metroid Prime: Federation Force* – proving that the publisher at least acknowledges the franchise still exists – but it's not a real *Metroid* game. Not by a long shot. Considering every Nintendo home console (barring the Nintendo 64) has a *Metroid* game to its name, we can't imagine Nintendo skipping the Wii U entirely… surely? If we had our way, we'd steal Moon Studios (*Ori And The Blind Forest*) away from Microsoft and give the developer to Nintendo: *Ori* was one of the best metroidvanias we've played in a good few years, and the presentation was nothing short of spell-binding. We believe the fledgling studio could make a *much* better *Metroid* game than any that have been published in the last few generations of gaming.

Likelihood: 80%

Nintendo is aware that players want a 'proper' *Metroid* game, and has officially acknowledged that. Watch this space.



8. DEF JAM

Last Release: **Def Jam: Icon**
Dream developer: **NetherRealm**

Why:



UP-CLOSE-and-personal brawling, no in-game HUD, having music be a *huge* part of combat, progressive visual damage and some of the biggest names in hip-hop and rap… what isn't to like about that set-up? The licence to *Def Jam* games is still held by EA, but we can't imagine Nas or Ludacris or Ghostface Killah would want to re-submit their tracks or likenesses to a game this violent and brutal now that we're edging ever closer to the uncanny valley. But if they *did*… how amazing would it be to see NetherRealm take the reins of the operation? That level of brutality would go hand-in-hand with the lyrical content of the majority of modern hip-hop, right? Why stop at throwing Sean Paul under a train when you could, say, rip off Kanye's arms and wail on his remaining body with them?

Likelihood: 1%

Never say never, but we really can't see EA reviving this franchise for any reason.





9. JET SET RADIO

Last Release: **Jet Set Radio HD (2012)**
Dream developer: **Insomniac Games**

Why:



THERE JUST aren't enough games with attitude out there at the moment – not by a long shot. *Jet Set Radio* was most certainly a product of its times, and it might take some revolutionising to become relevant again now, but surely Insomniac's *Sunset Overdrive* would be an adequate dry-run of that? Take out the guns and speed everything up a bit and you've got a perfect foundation for the next great *Jet Set* game.

Likelihood: 10%

Sega owns the rights to *Jet Set Radio* still, but none of its internal studios seem suited to the franchise. There have been no updates on the IP for years.



10.

MEDIEVIL

Last Release: **MediEvil: Resurrection (2005)**
Dream developer: **Double Fine**



Why:

ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED by Sony's own internal studio in Cambridge, England, *MediEvil* has become something of an icon to the PlayStation… despite not having its own game released on the platform since the PSX. It's surely time for Sony to ship that licence out, right? To fire it on over to the comedy geniuses over at Double Fine and let the studio have its fun with *MediEvil*'s staple humour-cum-action platforming-lite gameplay? It's time to resurrect Sir Daniel Fortesque once again.

Likelihood: 30%

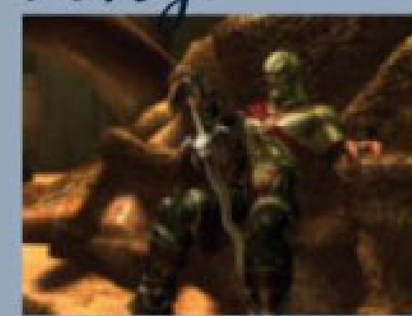
The *MediEvil* licence has been dormant for a good ten years now – while it could come back, we're not holding our breath for it.

11.

LEGACY OF KAIN

Last Release: **Legacy Of Kain: Defiance (2003)**
Dream developer: **Visceral Games**

Why:



THE ACTION-ADVENTURE series revolving around the vampire Kain and his chronologically inconsistent journey through time was left incomplete – the final episode in the released library of games leaving more loose threads than it tied up. Original series writer Amy Hennig recently joined Visceral Games (*Dead Space, Dante's Inferno*) and is working with the EA studio on a narrative-led *Star Wars* game… but imagine if that perfect alignment of creative energy was ushered into rounding off the gothic epic in Nosgoth that began some 20 years ago. It would be the kick up the backside the traditional action-adventure game needs.



Likelihood: 5%

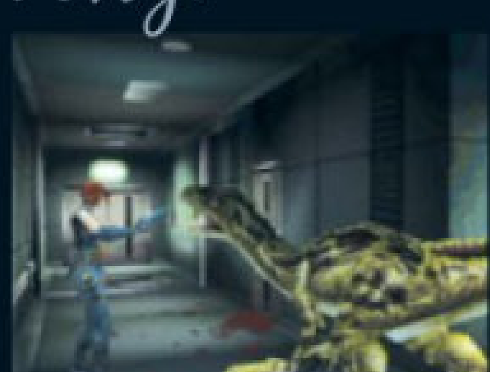
Square Enix has already scrapped one *Legacy Of Kain* reboot (*Dead Sun*) and the only action the series is seeing takes the form of the online-only arena shooter, Nosgoth.

12.

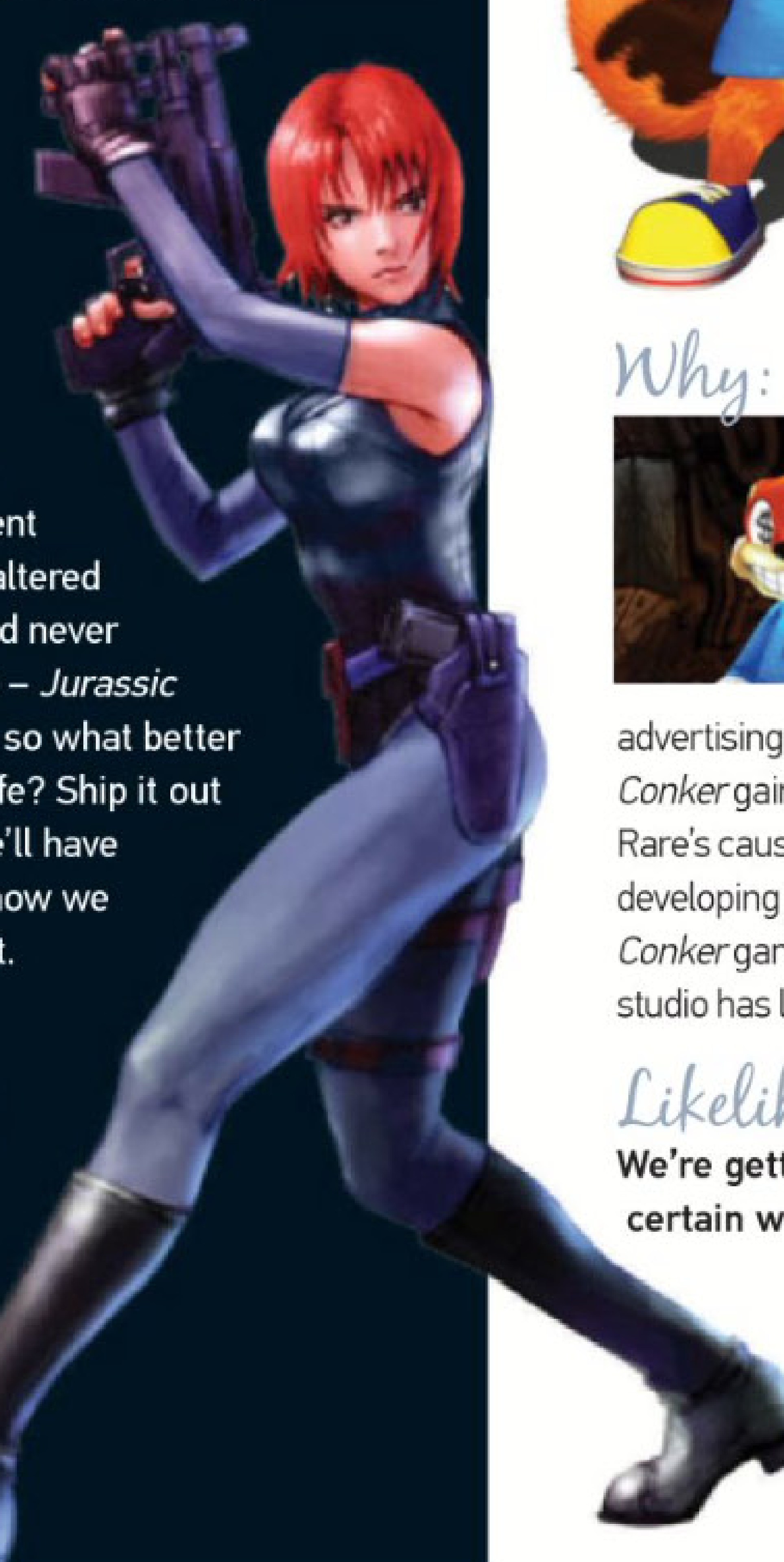
DINO CRISIS

Last Release: **Dino Crisis 3 (2003)**
Dream developer: **Creative Assembly**

Why:



DEVELOPED BY the same team that came up with *Resident Evil* (including Shinji Mikami), *Dino Crisis* is the action-horror sister game to the stalwart Resi franchise. But where *Resident Evil* went from strength to strength (debatably), *Dino Crisis* faltered on the third iteration, sending the story to space and never making it back to Earth. Dinosaurs are *in* right now – *Jurassic World, Horizon Zero Dawn, Ark: Survival Evolved* – so what better time will there ever be to bring the series back to life? Ship it out to Creative Assembly (*Alien: Isolation* team) and we'll have the dino-led survival horror we didn't even really know we wanted that badly, until we started thinking about it.



Likelihood: 5%

Capcom seems to have totally forgotten that it owns the rights to *Dino Crisis*, and seems less interested than ever in bringing it back.

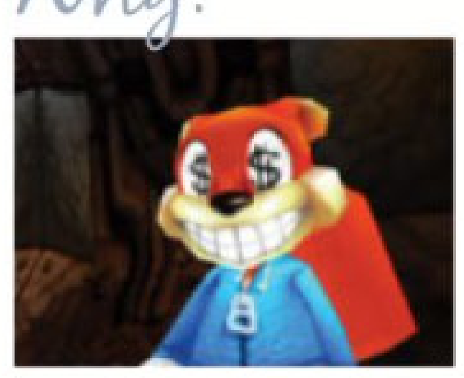


13.

CONKER

Last Release: **Conker: Live & Reloaded (2005)**
Dream developer: **Media Molecule**

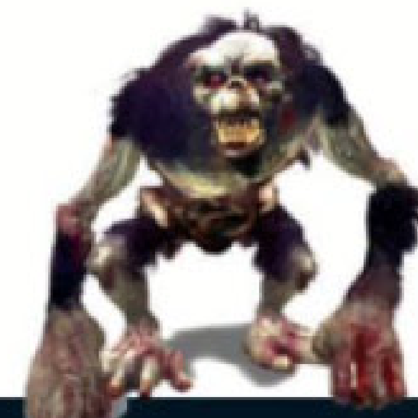
Why:



CONKER WAS probably the most mature game franchise ever established on a Nintendo console. The main character (the greedy, foul-mouthed alcoholic squirrel) only ever wanted to get back to his girlfriend Berri, and everything just seemed to get in his way. Despite not selling too well on its first outing (little advertising and coming out at the end of the Nintendo 64's life are to blame), *Conker* gained a cult following, and won over a lot of older fans to developer Rare's cause. We'd like to see a spiritual successor to that, both in gameplay and developing the story, with Media Molecule heading up development on a new *Conker* game: toning down the overly twee presentation and applying what the studio has learnt to a game aimed squarely at adults.

Likelihood: 90%

We're getting some *Conker* content in *Rare Replay*, but we're almost certain we'll be getting another *proper* game sometime soon.



14.

DISCWORLD

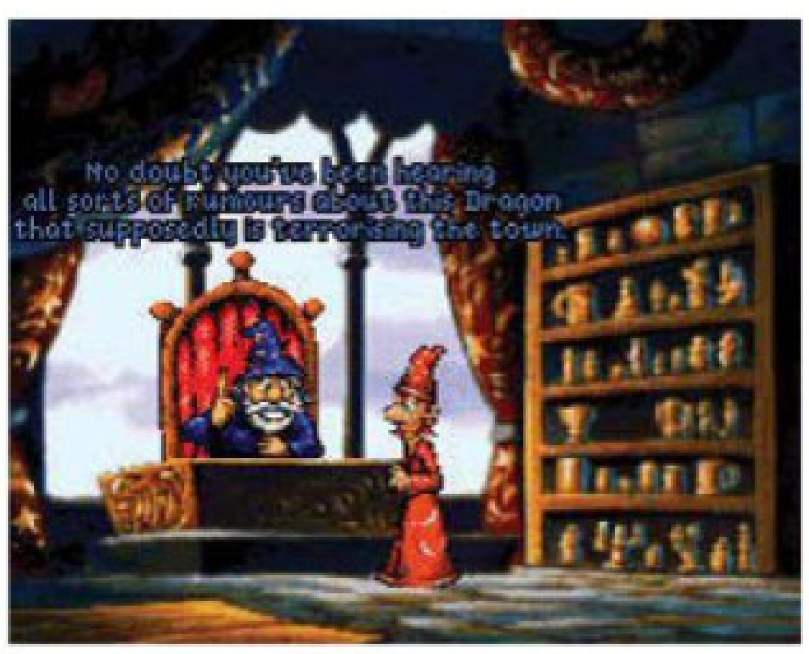
Last Release: **Discworld Noir (1999)**
Dream developer: **Telltale**

Why:

THE DISCWORLD universe is so deep and rich with story that it's outrageous there haven't been more games based on the property. With the recent passing of Terry Pratchett and a continued push by Sky TV in bringing the books to life, it seems like it's the right time to cross-pollinate media with a game series. Who better to take on the mantle of narratively-led stories than Telltale, too? The studio has already earned its stripes with *Borderlands*, *Fables*, *The Walking Dead*, *Game Of Thrones* and even *Minecraft*... so what would stop the team's impeccable writers from making the Discworld mythos fit into a new-fangled point-and-click adventure? The series has excelled in that genre once before, it could do it again.

Likelihood: 30%

The Discworld licence is in a state of flux right now, but we can imagine – with the right partnership in place – a fantastic game that would do justice to Pratchett's world







15.

BLACK & WHITE

Last Release: **Black & White 2: Battle Of The Gods (2006)**
Dream developer: **Firaxis Games**

Why:

THE (ALMOST) UI-free god game from the mind of Peter Molyneux has been forgotten by its creator in favour of newer and shinier endeavours, but we'll always remember the impact *Black & White* had on the industry – furthering the work *Age Of Empires* and *Pharaoh* had been doing within the god-game sub-genre. If we were to see the game re-born, we'd like to see *Civilization* developers Firaxis Games take a punt at it: it's more fantastical and freeing than the more simulation-based games the studio is used to, and we'd like to see what the development team could do with that kind of god-like freedom.

Likelihood: 10%

***Black & White*, along with *Command & Conquer*, seem to be at the bottom of EA's priority list, unfortunately**



16.

GEX

Last Release: **Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko (1999)**
Dream developer: **DrinkBox Studios**

Why:

A PLATFORM-ACTION game inspired by insipid American television culture, that featured a *literal* lounge lizard as its mascot? What's not to love? *Gex* as a series managed to sell over 15 million units in its short lifetime, and since then everyone seems to have forgotten about the dimension-hopping gecko. DrinkBox Studios (*Guacamelee!*, *Severed*) would make a good home for *Gex* – its penchant for sharp, cartoony artstyle would support *Gex*'s channel-hopping, and the studio's familiarity with fourth-wall breaking humour and meme culture would work perfectly alongside the art direction.

Likelihood: 80%

In 2015, Square Enix announced that it owned the rights to *Gex* and have opened up pitches to indie developers



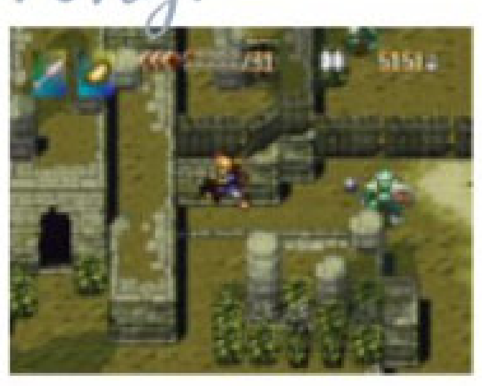
19.



17. THE ADVENTURES OF ALUNDRA

Last Release: **Alundra 2: A New Legend Begins (1999)**
Dream developer: **From Software**

Why:



BENEATH ITS delightful 32-bit top-down classic RPG look, *Alundra* was a dark, twisted little action adventure. Like *TLOZ*, you wake up with no memory, only instead of a Princess, a sword, and a noble quest that proves your bravery and worth, Alundra finds a gloomy town, haunted people, and a mysterious darkness imbuing the land with misery. Plus, he can enter people's dreams, and that would be excellent creative justification for a developer like From Software to get *weird*. With a strong puzzling element that brutally punished you for messing up, *Alundra* also had great, often disturbing bosses. Is this sounding familiar? We would *love* to see this franchise brought back by a studio that excels in broken, twisted worlds and epic boss battles.

Likelihood: 20%

***Alundra* has been missing in action for so long, we're not even sure who owns the IP. We're living through a renaissance of old IPs rebirthing though, so we remain hopeful.**

OKAMI

Last Release: **Okami (2006)**
Dream developer: **Thatgamecompany**

Why:



OKAMI'S BEAUTY lay in the fact it was a *Zelda* game reskinned and re-energised, and presented in a beautiful, unique way. There are an overwhelming amount of 3D games these days that take the form of shooters in various dingy shades of brown and grey, so coming up with a developer that could really do this 3D platforming world justice was fairly tricky. We settled on Thatgamecompany – creator of *Journey* and *Flower* – as it would surely do justice to a stylish, minimal *Okami*, lovingly created and wholly loyal to its mythical roots.

Likelihood: 10%

***Okami* is in Capcom's hands (for better or worse) so we imagine it'll turn up once the publisher needs another funding boost again.**

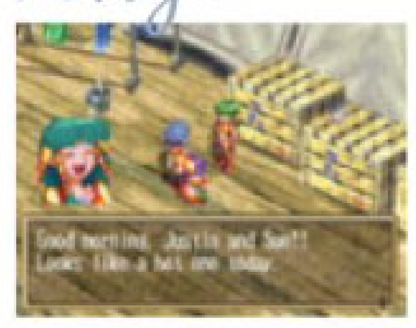




18. GRANDIA

Last Release: **Grandia Online MMO (2009)**
Dream developer: **Ubisoft Montreal**

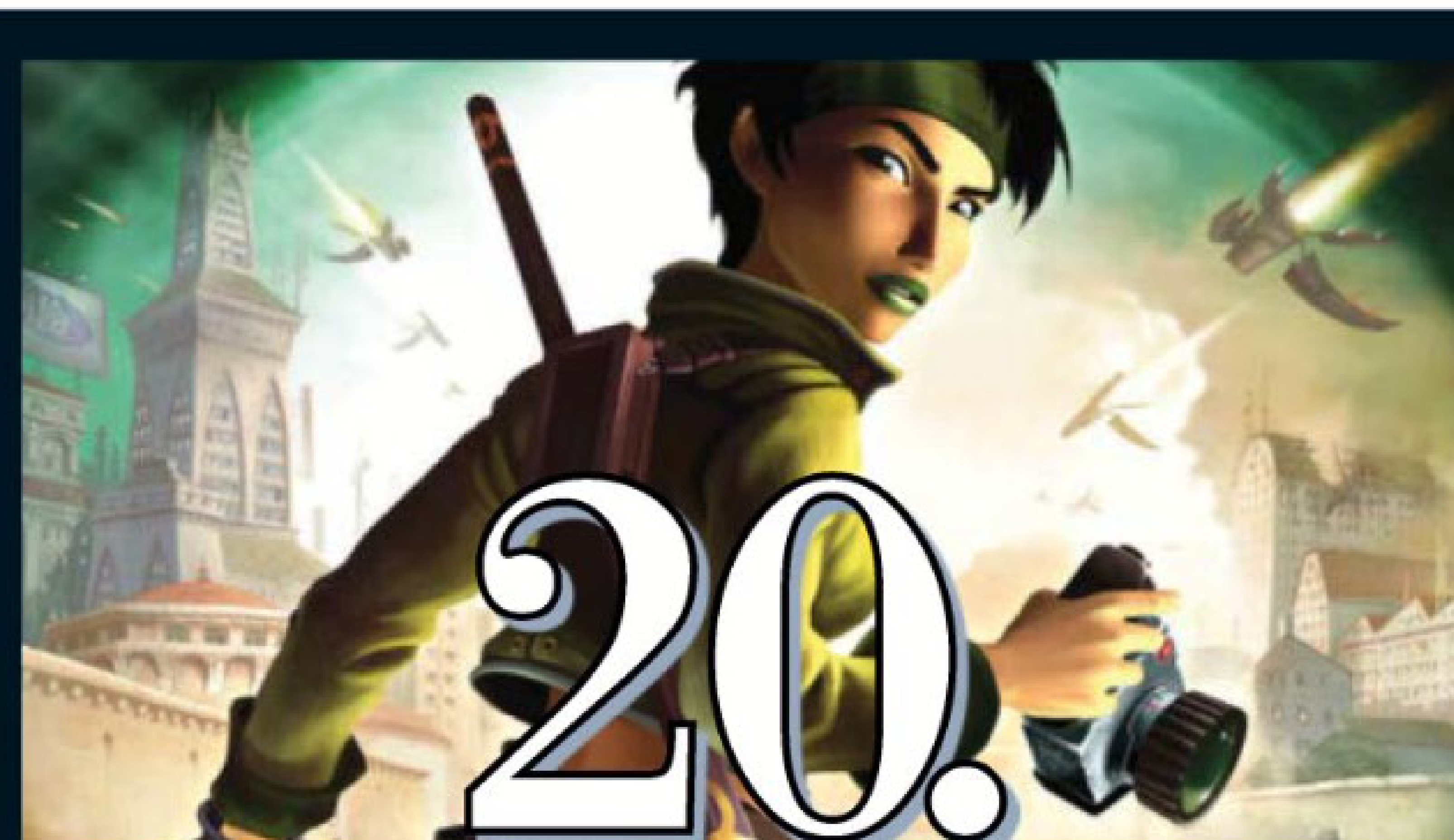
Why:



LET'S FACE it, Ubisoft Montreal has already got *Grandia*'s combat system locked down. The whole initiative bar of semi-turn-based combat is a fantastic way to make RPG combat fun and engaging, and we're surprised more games haven't included it since. Plus, endearing though *Child Of Light* was, it was storybook shallow in its approach to plot. It worked fine for what it was, but that beautiful engine being used to created a deep world with characters we can really get behind and a complex RPG plot to unravel? In the UbiArt engine? Yes please, Ubisoft Montreal.

Likelihood: 5%

Game Arts hasn't released a game since 2012, but with *Grandia II Remastered* coming any decade now, it's unlikely to be giving up the franchise.



20. BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL


Last Release: **Beyond Good And Evil (2003)**
Dream developer: **Naughty Dog**

Why:

COMMERCIALLY DISASTROUS but critically acclaimed, *Beyond Good And Evil* was envisioned as the first part of a supposed trilogy by *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel… but the awful sales prevented Ubisoft from investing in the series further. We'd like to see Naughty Dog – and the narrative geniuses that operate behind those closed doors – have a go at continuing Jade's story; it's well known that Naughty Dog prioritises story above all else, and that's the kind of treatment this series really deserves.

Likelihood: 80%

It remains likely that we'll see another *Beyond Good And Evil* game soon – Ubisoft Montpellier has been working on something for a few years now, but it just keeps being pushed back. We live in continual hope.



CAN YOU TRUST ASSASSIN'S CREED?

With the Unity disaster still fresh in the memory, can Syndicate possibly restore faith in a broken franchise?

If Ubisoft can walk away with any positives from the *Assassin's Creed: Unity* furore that emerged last November, it was that the litany of game-breaking bugs and glitches that rendered it near-unplayable for weeks seemingly distracted the masses from the failings of its core design. That, admittedly, can't really be considered a win by any stretch of the imagination, but it's certainly something for the publisher to think about.

With that in mind, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* has an almost impossible task in front of it: not only is it seeking to restore faith in a franchise tarnished by numerous indiscretions and PR disasters, but it also needs to deliver an experience worth playing to the millions of fans that still indiscriminately flock to the Animus every year. Can you trust in *Assassin's Creed* again? Probably. But perhaps the real question is, should you want to?

"This is Ubisoft Quebec's first game, our first lead for *Assassin's Creed*. We're really excited to try and bring something new to the franchise," considers game director Scott Phillips. "We absolutely want to make this the best *Assassin's Creed*. We really want to prove something and come out of the gate strong. For me personally, that's what brought me to the studio – meeting the team and seeing how much they wanted to prove themselves, how hard they've fought and pushed to make sure that this is the best game that we possibly can," he says, adding. "Montreal is a huge, amazing studio, but I think it was great to have some new blood working on *Assassin's Creed*."



It feels like we might need to recap. It's another year, and another entry into the seemingly unstoppable *Assassin's Creed* series. Ubisoft is saying au revoir to the French Revolution, crossing the English Channel and heading towards 19th Century London; leaping into the Industrial Revolution and exploring a time period that saw the capital develop into a sprawling urban landscape. You have the Frye twins at the centre of the adventure – dual-playable protagonists Jacob and Evie – a dangerous duo that's hell-bent on taking the city back from the Templar regime that occupies the ruling class. There's a larger emphasis on stealthing in plain sight, concealed weaponry, a visceral and gory new combat system, and expandable top hats that inexplicably separate the assassins from the well-to-do gentry circa 1868.



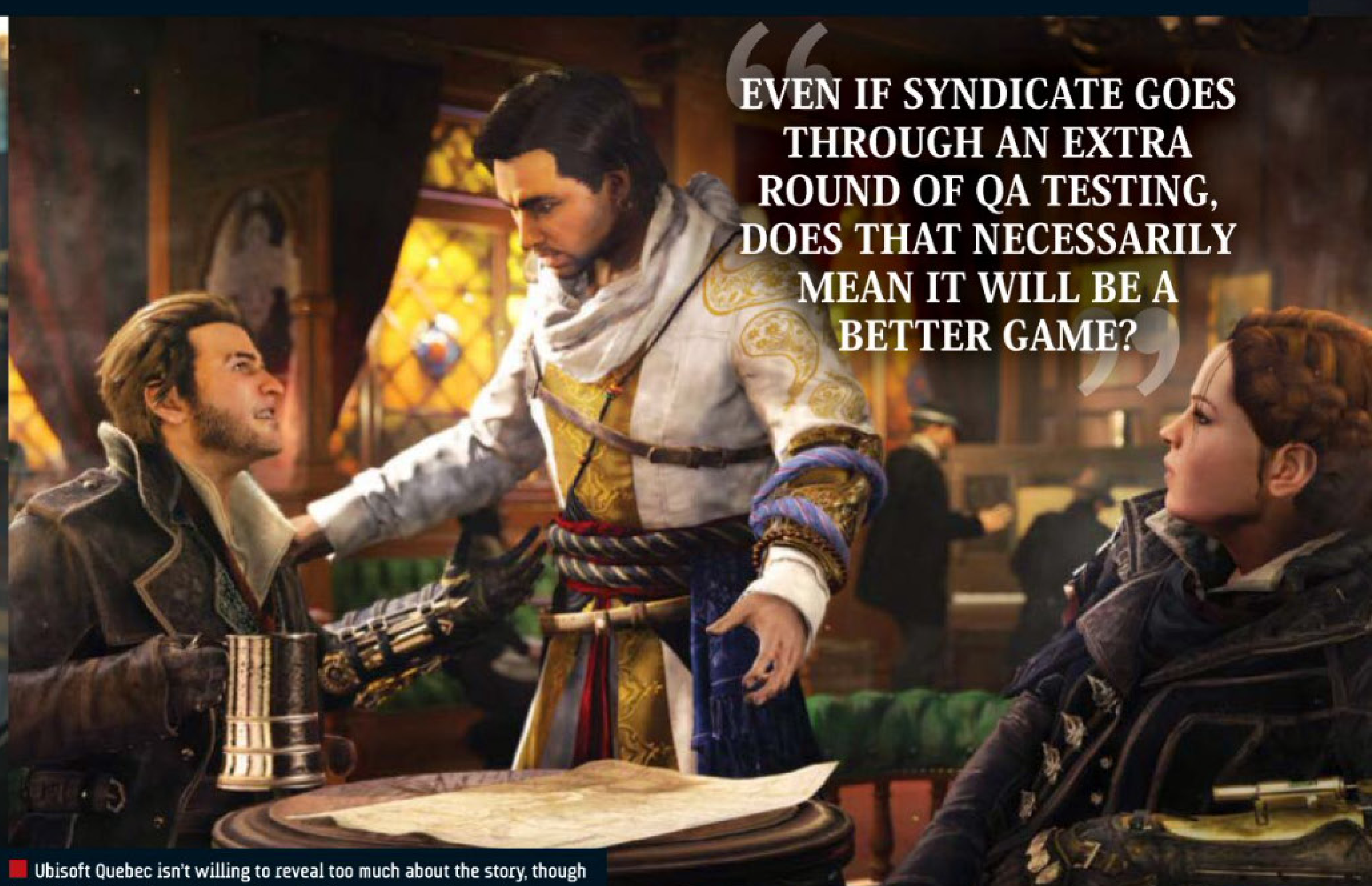
These are all items that sit highly on any and all *Assassin's Creed* fan's wish list, as was the decision to recreate Victorian-era London. As if we would ever dare expect anything less from an *Assassin's Creed* game, but the world is genuinely impressive and an absolute delight to explore. If there are still two things you can trust Ubisoft to deliver without question, it's that it knows how to deliver a stunningly faithful open-world and it knows how to fill it with a ton of distractions. When creative director Marc-Alexis Côté tells you that *Syndicate* will feature the "biggest city-based open-world" *Assassin's Creed* has ever seen, you can't help but be both impressed and intimidated. Say what you will about *Assassin's Creed*, but its world design is fairly unrivalled in modern videogames.

"With *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, we chose to focus on creating the biggest city based open-world we've ever had for an *Assassin's Creed* game, and on refining and perfecting the innovative new gameplay elements that make-up the single player experience," notes Côté. "The Industrial Revolution and all its technological breakthroughs enabled humanity to evolve from a medieval society into the modern world we know today. It's a leap forward for mankind, and similarly for the world of *Assassin's Creed*. It opens up a whole new set of dynamics and opportunities for the player. There is no better place to showcase this period than in the capital of the nation that gave birth to this great revolution."

The industrial revolution might have been a "leap forward" for mankind, but it also feels like it could be a leap forward for *Assassin's Creed*. Walking around the re-creation of London as Jacob or Evie Frye is a delight. The buildings are taller and more imposing, the streets feel wider – no doubt to accommodate the introduction of vehicles and vehicular combat – and the scope is more impressive, overall, than anything Ubisoft Montreal ever delivered while it had the franchise reins. It is worth remembering, of course, that we have experienced exploration thus far without direct access to the map – though from what we can tell, »







"EVEN IF SYNDICATE GOES THROUGH AN EXTRA ROUND OF QA TESTING, DOES THAT NECESSARILY MEAN IT WILL BE A BETTER GAME?"

Ubisoft Quebec isn't willing to reveal too much about the story, though it will still take players into modern day for more convoluted adventures.



While *Syndicate* has made combat more visceral and brutal than before, it lacks polish. You never feel like you have direct control over your character in fights.

Ubisoft really should start bundling psychic-evaluation coupons in with *Assassin's Creed* to treat the collectible-based-kleptomania we develop every November without fail.

This is all well and good but, in spite of *Assassin's Creed*'s seemingly unbreakable popularity, all of these distinctly fan-servicing design decisions will be wrought for nothing unless *Syndicate* is able to finally innovate. Unless it can iterate beyond the clumsy, fiddly and often uninspired gameplay that has rested like an albatross around the neck of the franchise for so long. After an opportunity to get hands-on once again with the upcoming open-world behemoth, **games™** is still unconvinced that *Syndicate* is enough of an improvement to make us forgive and forget the wider problems that have been stewing beneath the surface since *Assassin's Creed* first debuted in 2007.

It's truly impressive that *Assassin's Creed* has managed to grow and expand as a brand, whilst still lacking any major innovation. Consider its competition, the likes of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* and *Batman: Arkham Knight*, third-person action games with a heavy emphasis on stealth, platforming and narrative. They aren't the most complex games on the market, in fact, they could be considered a little shallow, but at least they are fun to play.

Combat and exploration is intuitive and engaging at a basic and instinctual level. They are sequels that have successfully built on what has come before them; improving on basics such as core-progression loops, movement and combat systems to appease fans, whilst still striving to reach new heights with more complex aspects of the game such as world, sound and character design evolving iteratively too. Crystal Dynamics and Rocksteady have realised that they couldn't have one without the other, why hasn't Ubisoft? A lot could (and has) been said about *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and its major bug infestation, but even if *Syndicate* goes through an extra round of QA testing, does that necessarily mean it will be a better game?

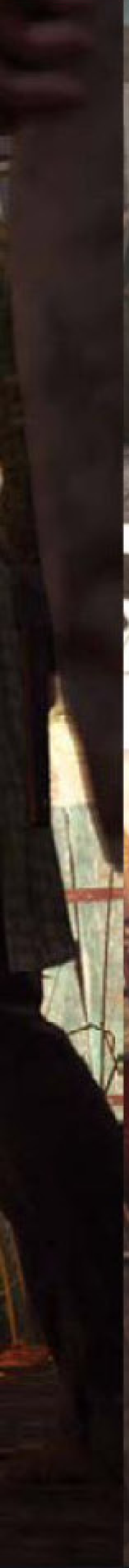
"We have already gone into great detail about what happened, so I don't have much more to expand on what has already been said," says a clearly exacerbated Côté, "except to reiterate how hard the team is working and how seriously we are taking our responsibilities to provide *Assassin's Creed* fans with an enjoyable and very memorable chapter in *Assassin's Creed* history."

> "IT SURPRISED US TO HEAR PHILLIPS SAY THAT "NOTHING HAS DIVERTED ATTENTION AWAY" FROM SYNDICATE'S DEVELOPMENT"

RESPONDING TO UNITY

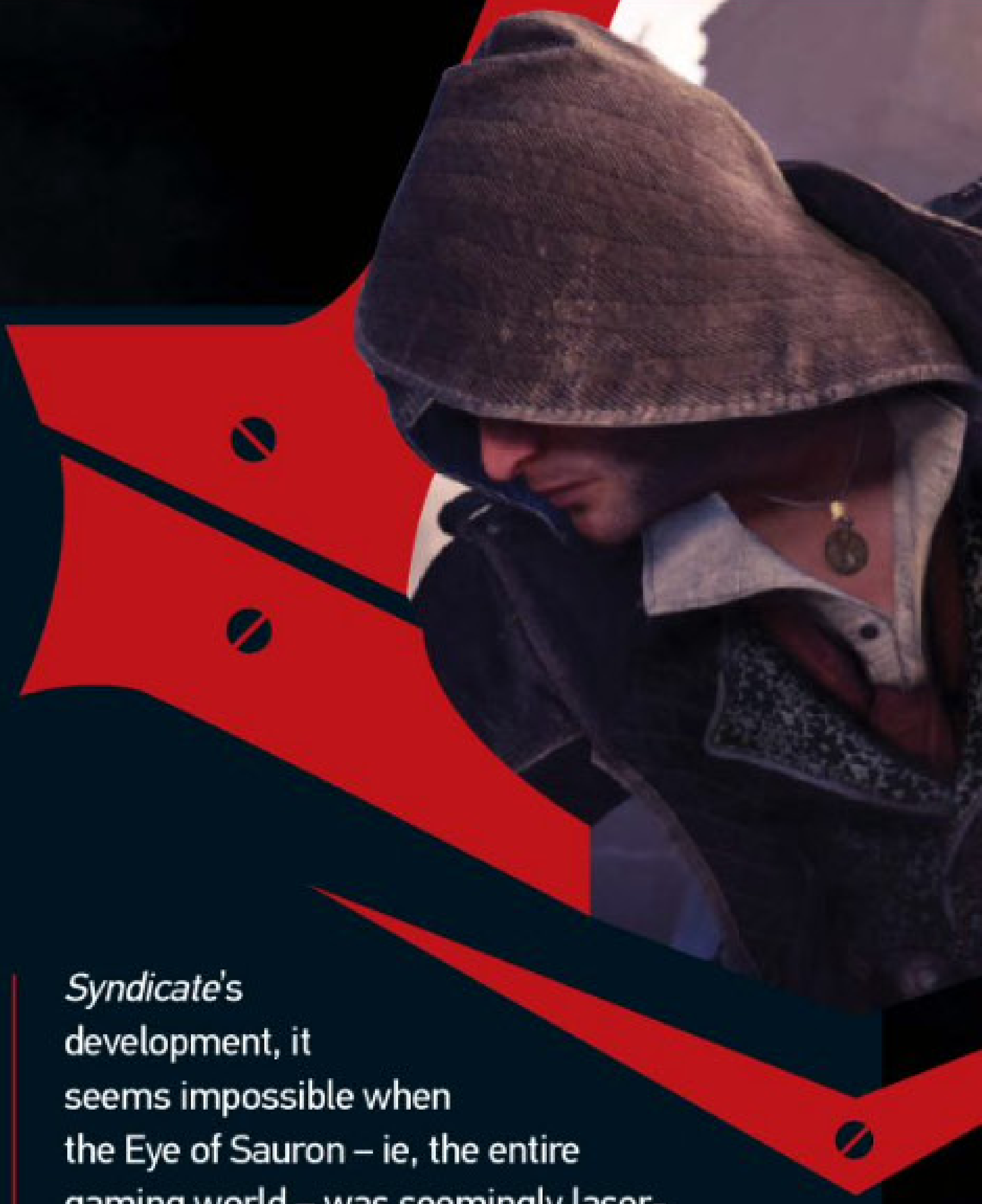
Still, whether it wants to talk about it or not, Ubisoft Quebec needs to outwardly show awareness of the issues surrounding *Unity*. It was the straw that broke the metaphorical camel's back, and *Syndicate* has to demonstrate that the intricate web of studios that make up the *Assassin's Creed* global development team can be responsive. With over a thousand employees worldwide – and in the last two years, somebody, somewhere in the world always working on *Syndicate* – this is apparently easier said than done.

"It's certainly a challenge. But with nine studios working on *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, it gives us a really great perspective worldwide – and not just this one small, 100 or 200 people in this one location, are trying to have a message for the entire world," Phillips assures us. "We've got Newcastle, England, that works on our vehicles and brings great racing experience; Singapore works on our missions and they bring the very best *Assassin's Creed* experiences as well, so it really mixes together. In terms of the









vision, I don't think we ever really had a problem with everyone understanding it," he continues. "What we've found is that it is challenging, but it's also really good to have people go off on there own creative ways and then when you bring it all back together, you can pick and choose the best ideas from each studio and spread those around the world. It is a challenge, but I think it's really effective and brings a lot of creativity."

But here we are, weeks from release, and we are still yet to recognise that this creativity has filtered into the game in a meaningful way. When we speak to Phillips about the studio's focuses throughout development, he speaks of building on the core foundations, "building up the stealth, building on the parkour and improving the fights," not iterating on or re-creating them. As clumsy as the *Assassin's Creed* games are, people still seem to love them. Is it because they are easy and adventurous tours of history? Is it because gamers like what they know? Whatever the answer to that dual barrage of questioning is, maybe Ubisoft is simply afraid of straying too far from what people know and – more importantly, for the publisher at least – is willing to invest money into every year without question.

It must have been challenging for the Quebec studio to be on the fringes of the *Unity* uproar; to see the reaction to last year's game and wonder how it could implement enough changes to appease players before it was too late. But it surprised us to hear Phillips say that "nothing has diverted attention away" from *Syndicate*'s development, it seems impossible when the Eye of Sauron – ie, the entire gaming world – was seemingly laser-focused on the franchise and how it could come back from the *Unity* disaster.

"We've been focused on *Syndicate* for two years, so for us it was about focusing on our game and making the right choices for us. That was why we've chosen to focus on the single-player aspect and focus on the core of what we thought *Assassin's Creed* was about," considers Phillips, adding, "having no multiplayer, removing co-op, having no companion app, were made specifically to put all of our focus on the single-player.

"We wanted to preserve what's great, and then focus on improving and bringing new [elements] in. I think... for me, if you like *Assassin's Creed*, you will absolutely like *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*," he says. "If you are new to the franchise then I think you will really like it as well; it's a really strong game, a really good core loop of progression, we've got a lot of new stuff in the game, and I think it feels really fresh, and I think that's something Ubisoft Quebec has really focused on." »



Time for a reboot?

With the story growing more complex, would Assassin's Creed benefit from a clean slate?

The *Assassin's Creed* story has become something of a bloated mess. *Unity* sought to fix this, by pulling as much focus off of the wilder elements and trying to bring the focus back to the core Assassin versus Templar struggle, but it was still difficult to parse.

Even fans that have stuck with the franchise for close to a decade are finding it difficult to follow, while new players must be baffled by the very notion of time-travelling assassins and magical apples that can alter the very fabric of reality. So, is it time for a reboot? Something to wipe the slate clean and start anew? *Syndicate*'s game designer Scott Phillips doesn't think it is necessary.

"I don't think... for me, the core of what *Assassin's Creed* is – with that historical time travel – in a way timeless. It is Assassins versus Templars across all of human history, so there is... I don't think a reboot would be necessary at any point, because you can just keep telling new stories at any point. You can just keep telling stories within that universe... that universe is really unique within games."

At its most basic premise, we are inclined to agree. A machine that can time travel pretty much anyone to any era to explore a slice of history is a timeless maguffin, though a trimming of the fat could certainly help its appeal here. For what it's worth, *Syndicate* will continue the long standing tradition of muddying things further with modern day sections: "We aren't talking about the present day much yet, there is a present day for sure, but how it fits in we will get into more later. For me, as a fan, I really love the present day so I'm really glad to see it in the game."



The re-creation of Victorian-era London is genuinely impressive. The size and scope of the capitol is a real achievement.

Reactionary Design

Turns out it isn't that hard to create female avatars after all

It's difficult to trust Ubisoft when it so openly changes its tune. One of the major issues levied at *Assassin's Creed: Unity* surrounded its lack of playable female characters in co-op – a feature that was apparently in development but then cut due to a "reality of production," creative director Alex Amancio said at the time. While he didn't rule out the addition in the future, it seemed unlikely that it would become a reality if Ubisoft Montreal – one of the largest game development studios in the world – couldn't develop it into *Assassin's Creed* during *Unity*'s four-year development cycle, nobody could.

Unsurprisingly, *Syndicate* showed up with dual protagonists, though game director Scott Phillips assures us this wasn't reactionary, but was part of development all along. "Jacob and Evie were there from the beginning, so over two years ago. The idea of having two characters and having two sides to the story was there from the very beginning. I'd say it has been really dynamic how the two have grown together. But the focus was always on giving two sides to the same story, to give the player access to both."

It stands to reason that the '8,000 animations' that would have supposedly been required for female avatars in Unity, have in fact been in production for some time at Ubisoft. It's small indiscretions like this that dent trust in the overall brand, but at least it's great to see *Syndicate* taking positive action in this regard.



When you really cut through it all, it's easy to see the problem. When people talk about Ubisoft taking advantage of their trust, when they talk about losing faith in *Assassin's Creed*, it becomes quite clear that a few weeks of frame-rate problems and glitches are seen as being more problematic than core failings.

For what it's worth, in that respect at least, it seems like *Syndicate* is at least more solid than *Unity*. The removal of superfluous game modes and content has given the studio more time than ever before to polish and refine the game that's there. Phillips is even eager to point out how early the team has been showing off playable demos, a sign that things are coming together better than ever, but we are concerned that a larger issue lingers in the shadows.

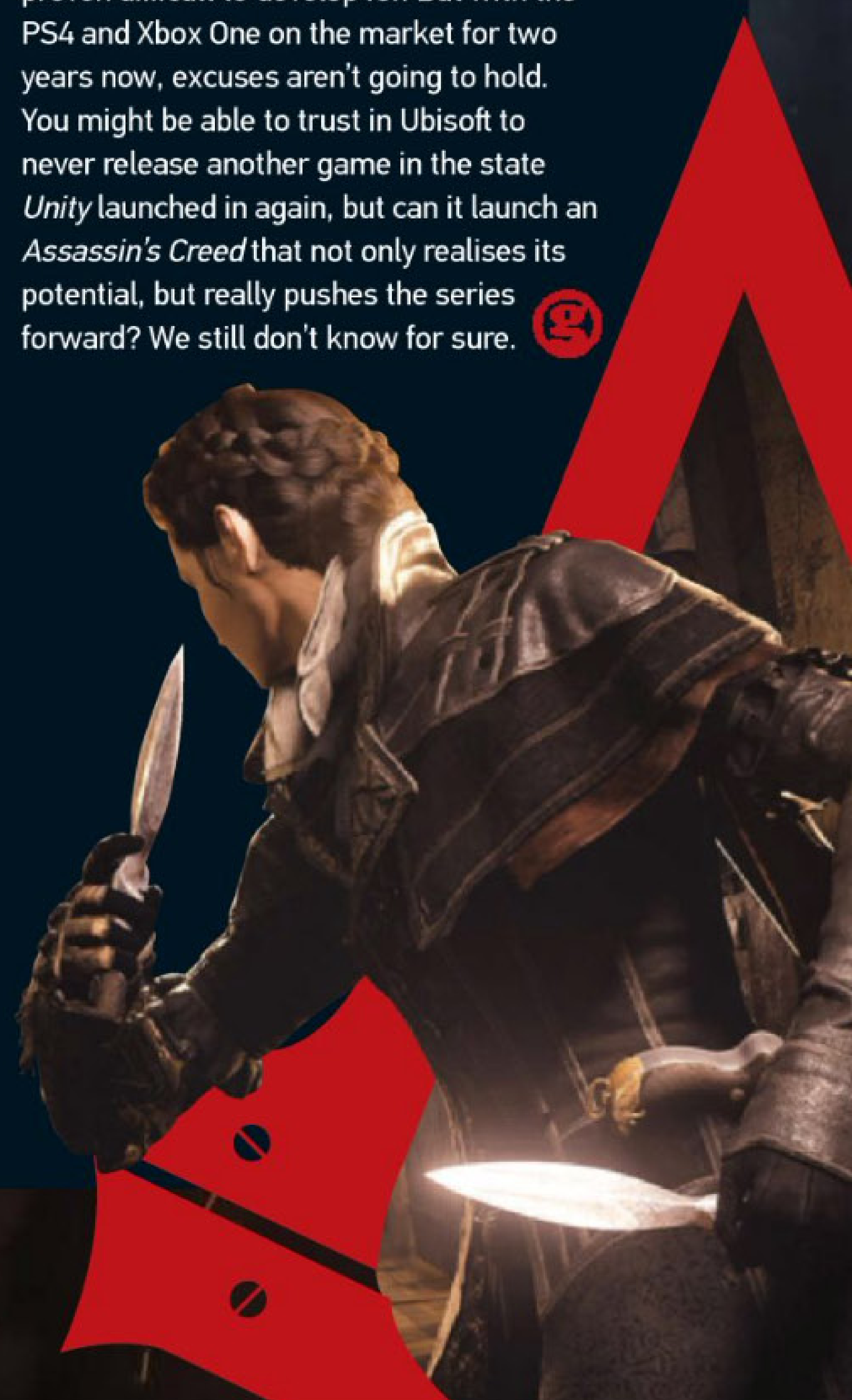
So where do we go from here?

If all you are concerned about is the look of the gameplay you're already keen on, then sure, from what we've played and seen behind closed doors, *Syndicate* will do a good job of instilling trust in the franchise again. Our concern is that Ubisoft is failing to innovate with one of the largest and most creatively ambitious franchises on the market, stuck in a holding pattern of annual releases instead.

The AnvilNext engine, introduced for *Unity* to help evolve *Assassin's Creed* and take advantage of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One's technology, is clearly a powerful tool. The introduction of a dedicated stealth button, not to mention the ability to parkour down buildings as well as up them was a revelation, but it's difficult to escape the impression that it isn't being fully utilised.

Navigating the streets of London, battling on top of horse-drawn carriages and brawling in the streets as Jacob has a tendency to feel weightless. You might be given the impression that you're controlling a powerful and skilled assassin, but the controls and physics system doesn't properly emulate it. Similarly, stalking guards and stealthily navigating areas such as the Tower Of London as Evie is finicky and frustrating. There's a worrying disconnect between the potential of *Assassin's Creed* and the reality that its gameplay offers – but this has always been the case. The controls are no worse than they've ever been, but compared to its competition, it's a little disheartening. *Syndicate* relies heavily on spectacle, but has little ambition to back it up in a playable, tangible sense.

There's always been a reason to save *Assassin's Creed* from the criticism it sometimes deserves; the impressive world design making up for any lacklustre gameplay. There wasn't always enough power in the last-generation to appropriately match the scope of the design. The arrival of new hardware has proven difficult to develop for. But with the PS4 and Xbox One on the market for two years now, excuses aren't going to hold. You might be able to trust in Ubisoft to never release another game in the state *Unity* launched in again, but can it launch an *Assassin's Creed* that not only realises its potential, but really pushes the series forward? We still don't know for sure.



WHY I ❤...


SUPER MARIO BROS.

RANDY PITCHFORD, PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

“*So,* Mario 64 *is one of the finest games ever created… but I actually think* Mario Galaxy *beat it. It's interesting that [*Galaxy*] didn't have the impact that* Super Mario 64 *did, despite it being such a brilliantly designed game and so fun to play. But, personally, I will never forget the time I spent with* Super Mario Bros.

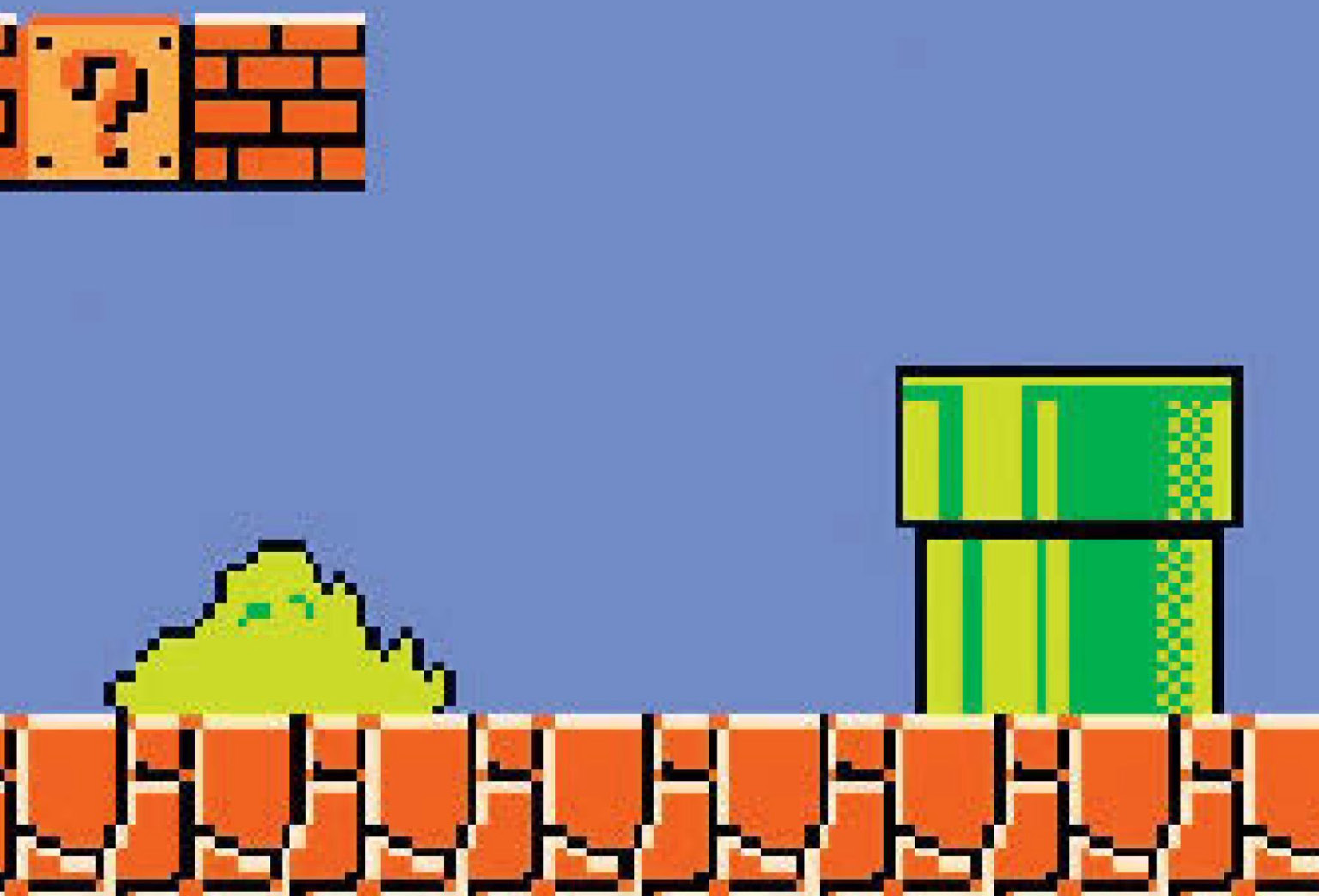
Did you ever watch Xplay before that shut down? It had Morgan Webb and Adam Sessler running their own TV show. In the last season, they were doing this thing where every guest on the show would do a speedrun of World 1-1 of Super Mario Bros. *I actually used to do races in that game – I'd have two machines set up, start at the same time and I'd race. Now, when I went onto Xplay, this was* years *ago, but fortunately for me, the skills held up and I got a perfect run. I mean* flawless.

You can YouTube it – it was insane*: I never let go of the run button, never hit a hitch. It was a flawless unbeatable time. I won the season, I was so proud. I love that game.*”



“I actually used to do races in Super Mario Bros. – I’d have two machines set up, start at the same time and I’d race”

RANDY PITCHFORD, PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE



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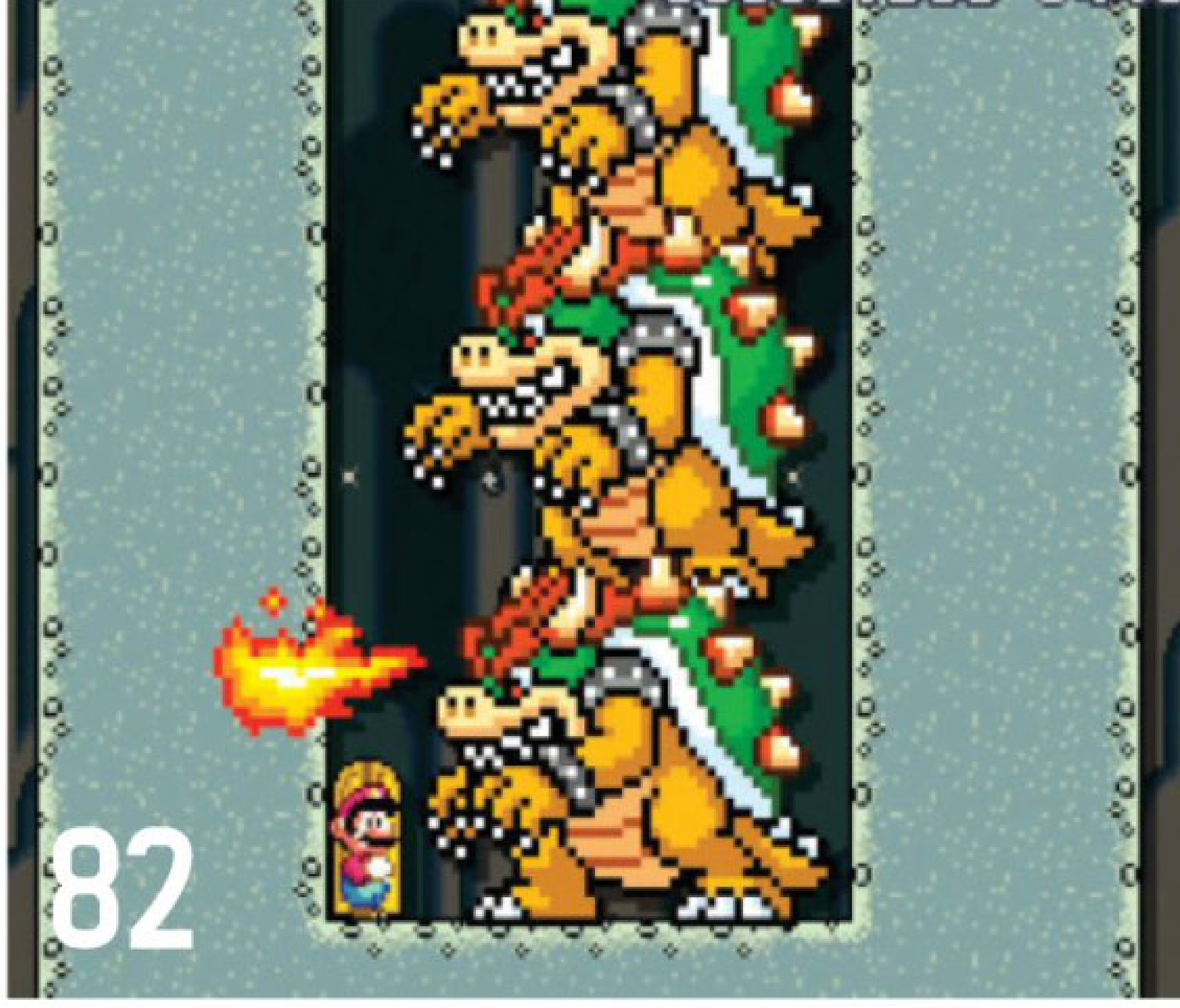
METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

We've heard the controversy, we've played the paid demo, but does Kojima's final *MGS* live up to all the hype?



THE AVERAGE

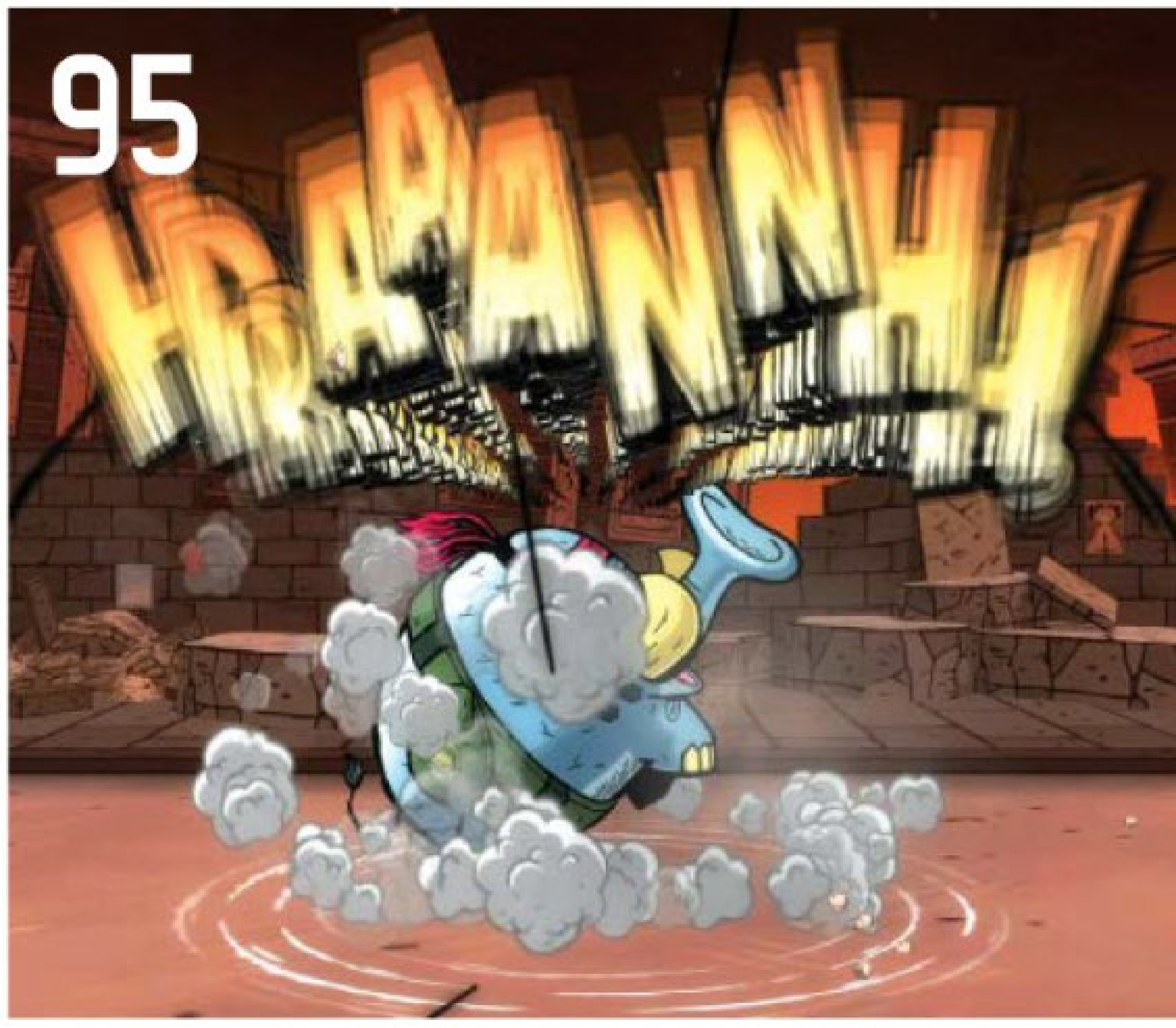
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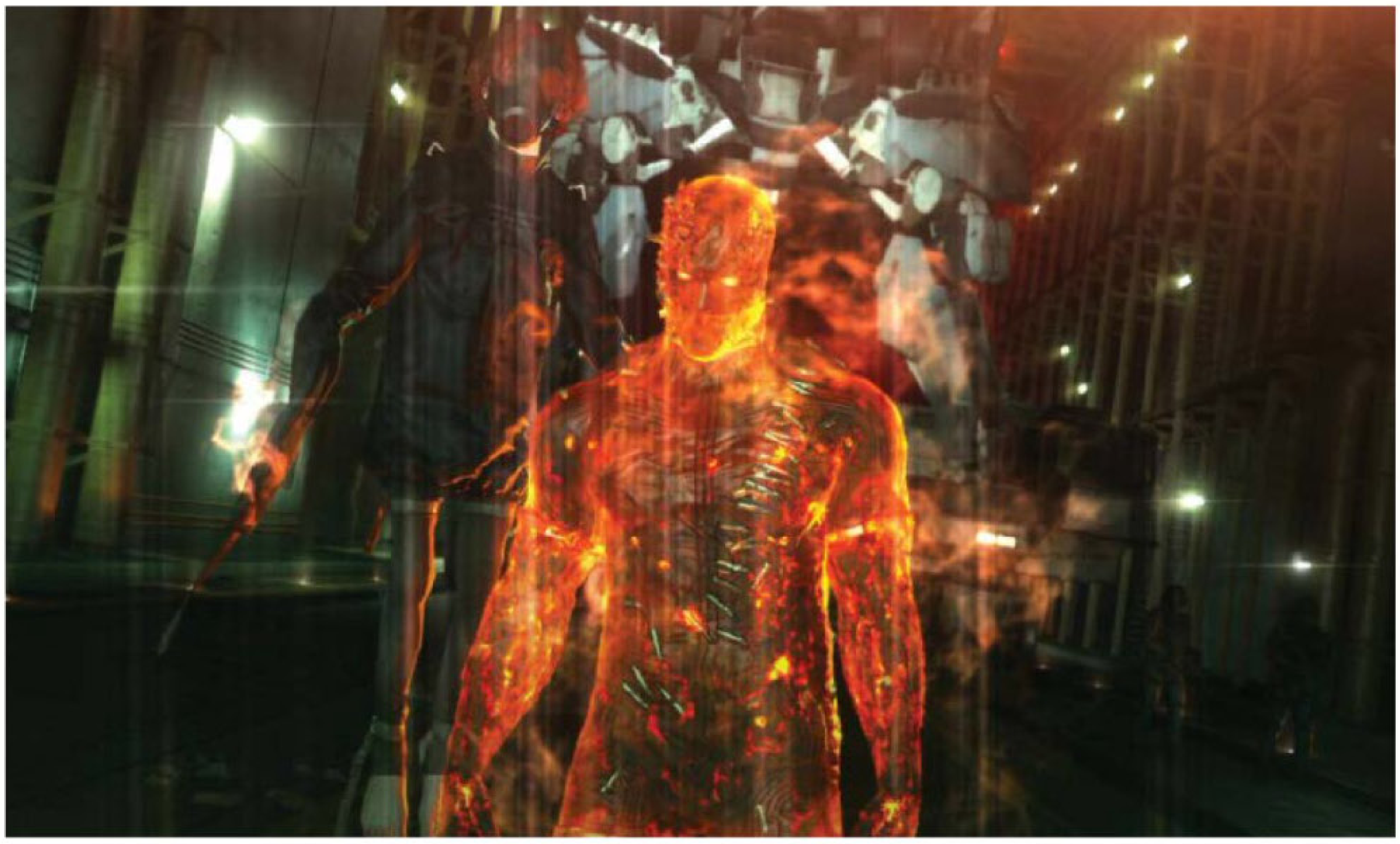
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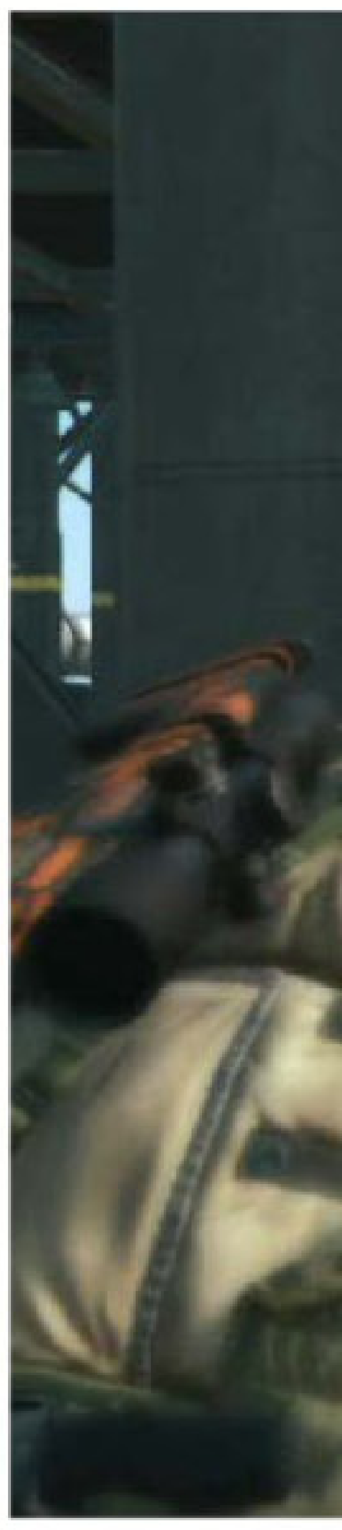


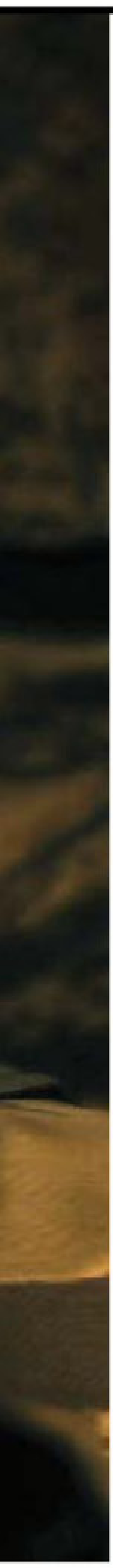
THE PHANTOM PAIN IS A SWANSONG SO ASTOUNDINGLY ASSURED, RICH IN QUALITY AND ABSURDLY FUN TO PLAY

CONVERTING THE HATERS

The *Metal Gear Solid* series has a good deal of people who love it –but it also has many vocal critics, wary of over-the-top stories, never-ending cutscenes and a core game experience that some find clunky and unappealing. So will *Metal Gear Solid V* convert the naysayers? We can't say for sure, but it has the best chance of any title in the series to date. While the story is still there – and still batshit at times – it doesn't dominate proceedings like in the past. And that core game experience? It strikes a wonderful balance between maintaining the challenge and appeal of prior games in the series while also controlling like a game made this century. The doubters should give *MGSV* a chance.







FROM ALL THE CONTROVERSY COMES TRUE GREATNESS

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Kojima Productions
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-TBC
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Left: Kiefer Sutherland, voice of Snake, does bring an ability to the role that former voice actor David Hayter just couldn't. We love Hayter as much as the next person, but his replacement makes more sense the longer you stick with Sutherland's Snake.

"Today is the day weapons learn to walk upright!" says the terribly scarred man known unironically as Skull Face. Kiefer Sutherland doesn't say much as the camera pans across, showing the shrapnel in Big Boss's head that quite literally looks like a devil horn. Zombie-like people sharing fashion tips with the Borg teleport instantly across the battlefield and make assault rifles appear from the palms of their hands. For those unaware: yes, this is *Metal Gear Solid*.

All the fears surrounding *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* have proven unfounded. The probability that this is Hideo Kojima's final entry to the series he created hasn't resulted in a half-baked effort. The change in playing style to a very large, very open world that allows you to take things on in a much more freeform style than previous games hasn't spoiled what made those earlier games so enthralling. In fact, what we have here with *The Phantom Pain* is Kojima Productions' masterpiece: a swansong so astoundingly assured, rich in quality and absurdly fun to play that it has immediately raised the bar for every blockbuster game that follows.

There's so much in *MGSV* it's difficult to know where to begin. Speaking of which, the 45-minute introductory sequence is a bit of a jarring opening to the game. Frustrating (intentionally so) and raising nothing but questions as you slowly make your escape from a Cypriot hospital following a nine-year coma, things almost get to the point where you're questioning just what the hell the rest of the game is going to be like. But it ends, and the real game begins – and that's when you realise you're playing one of the finest titles ever committed to disc. Or hard drive, if you go digital.

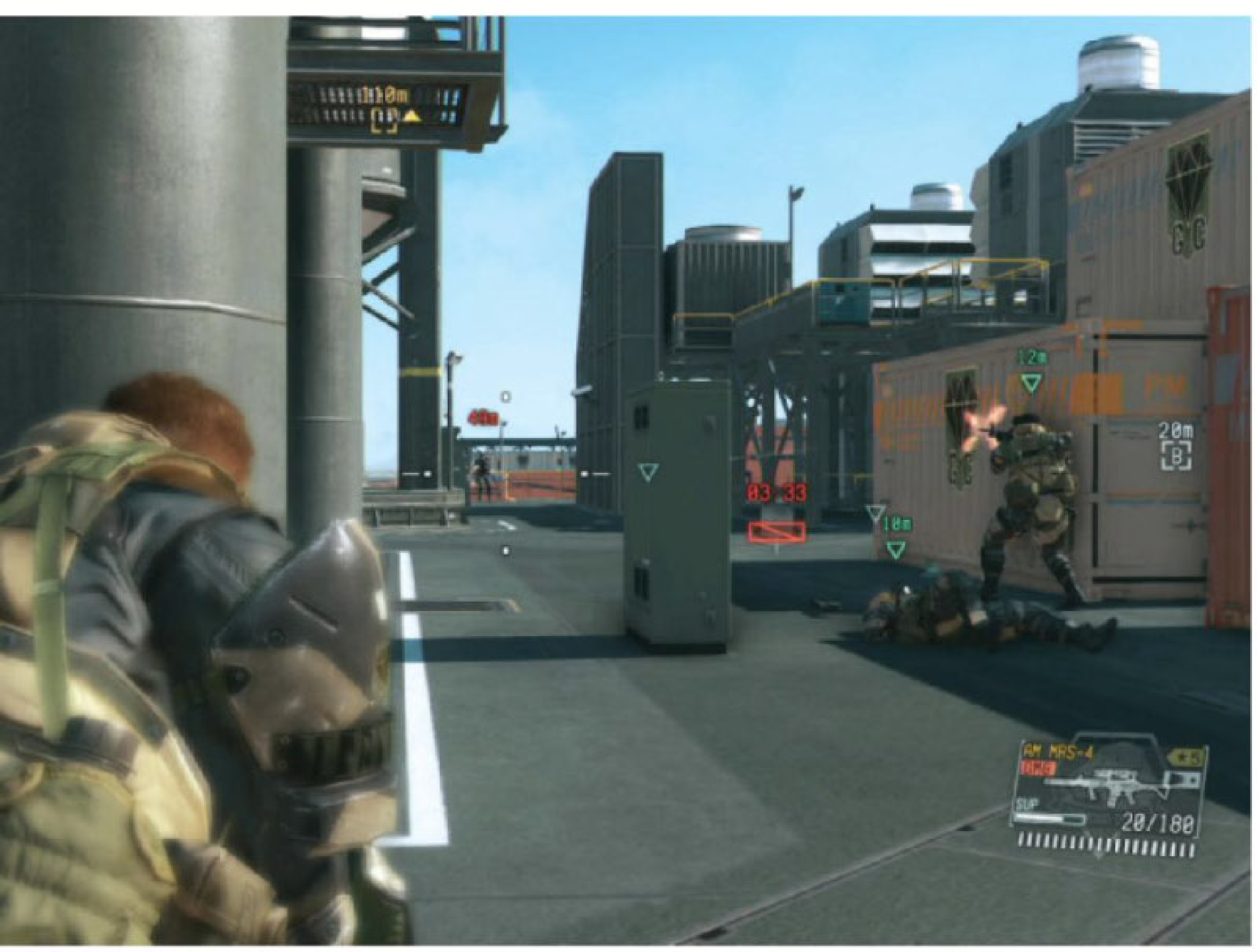
Suddenly you're let loose on Afghanistan – a huge region filled with varied terrain, from rocky cliffs to verdant greenery, cave villages and endless desert among others, it's a treat for the senses. It's easy to just get lost in this world you're introduced to; to ignore Miller and Ocelot's nattering on the radio as they tell you how to use your scope to mark targets before entering a conflict zone; to just go off on a jaunt with your trusty steed D-Horse. And you know what? *Metal Gear Solid V* won't mind. You can jog about checking out the scenery and picking tarragon and black carrots as much as you want, avoiding all combat and generally being the pacifist Kojima himself claims to be.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL
SLOWLY SLOWLY: This is the culmination of almost two decades of work on the series. Kojima and his team have learned a lot over the years, and it really shows.

Or you could learn the ropes – figuring out how to infiltrate successfully, how you can work your way through an outpost as quietly as a hushed whisper, treading carefully, surprising your enemy and interrogating information out of them to help zero in on your target. If that doesn't appeal, why not make yourself comfortable on a rocky outcrop half a kilometre away and do your best Sniper Wolf impression? Run in, guns blazing, and destroy half a battalion of enemies and most of their equipment? Distract the enemy by letting your horse idle about the hostile zone before dealing with the confused opposition however you like? Planting C4 on a jeep and running it straight into the middle of the outpost before detonating it and… you get the picture. The freedom in *Metal Gear Solid V* is, initially, overwhelming – but soon enough it becomes something you absolutely cannot live without.

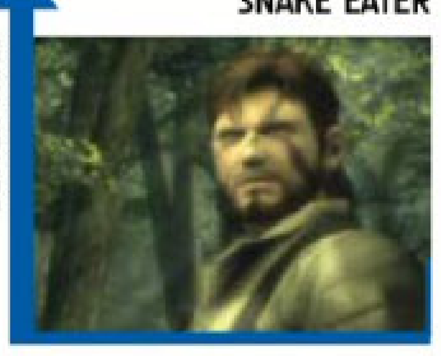
Weather and time of day are two big parts of this freedom – waiting for the sun to set, allowing for a stealthier entrance, will be the favoured approach of many. Some might want to wait for the shift change that comes in the morning and evening, slipping between the gaps left by troops going home and arriving at work. Some will want to play the elements, waiting for rainfall before going on the hunt, the heavy drops masking the sound of Venom Snake's footsteps. Maybe they'll want to play during a sandstorm, with enemy visibility and hearing reduced to almost zero – pop on a pair of thermal goggles and you've got yourself an advantage. Honestly, we could fill this entire review just with a list of ways we took on missions – and it would only cover a small portion of the available approaches.

Gone are the days of *Metal Gear Solid 3*'s clunky control system, *MGS2*'s awful first-person shooting, *Guns Of The Patriots*' inability to play like a modern game – *Metal Gear Solid V* looks and plays almost as well as we could have hoped for. Contextual controls make for a smooth, flowing experience in the main part, while switching between third- and first-person aiming is a simple case of a button press. There are even concessions made for players who want to use them, like 'reflex' mode – this buying

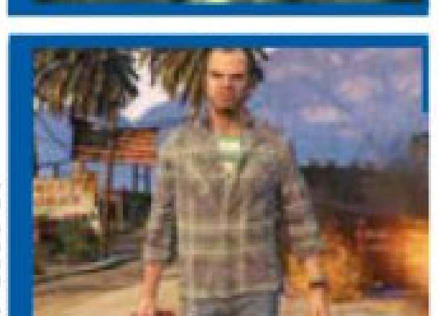


Left: The sheer wealth of choice available to the player is one thing, but the fact that game recognises and reacts to most of what you do is astonishing.

BETTER THAN
METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER



AS GOOD AS



GTA V

a freshly-spotted Snake a few valuable slow-motion seconds to nullify a threat and stop the alarm from being raised. It might seem like a gamebreaker to some, but it can be switched off – and those using it lose a points bonus every time reflex mode is engaged. You can use it and have fun with it, but you won't perfect *The Phantom Pain* by using it – and the game tells you as much by docking points.

Similarly, you aren't punished for outright killing opponents – instead merely docked a 'no kills' bonus. While we were unable to get through our time on the game with zero deaths, it's likely you can finish it without a kill under your belt, as has been the case in prior instalments. Aiding you in your quest to kill (or not kill) is a huge selection of weapons which can be researched, upgraded and – eventually – customised.

All approaches are supported through the armoury, from a basic hangun-and-assault rifle loadout to a tranquiliser pistol and riot control silenced machine gun firing rubber bullets. Or maybe you want a water pistol and a rocket launcher? All the grenade launchers you can carry? Once again, the choice is totally up to you – while you will find some approaches easier, or better suited to different situations, there's no *wrong* way to do things. Yes, taking on a full squad of Skulls – the aforementioned teleporting super-squad – with tranquilising weapons will be *difficult*, but it's certainly not impossible. And you will be rewarded for doing it, because Metal Gear Solid V recognises countless different ways of playing through it. Honestly, it's so nice to get feedback from the game when you adopt a particular approach – acknowledgement that your creativity is being catered for.

Most of that creativity comes through judicious use of gadgets and buddies, rather than just through weaponry. Using inflatable decoys spouting canned Sutherland lines to lure in the enemy is as comical as it is useful – at least until this very method is used against you – and strapping a knife to a dog, while something the RSPCA might take issue with, means you end up with yet another way to distract, harm and even take out the mercenaries littering *MGSV*'s battlefields. Or combine anti-vehicle mines with horse excrement to both destroy a tank and simultaneously take out a jeep carrying a passenger you don't wish to harm. Or don a cardboard box with a picture of a pin-up model on it. Or paint a buddy gold. Or cover said buddy in blood. Or ride in on the back of a robot armed with a minigun… As we said before, this could just be a list of ways we did things and methods we experimented with – there is a *lot* to *MGSV*.

Away from the battlefield, Snake and his militaristic chums are building a huge, secret base near the Seychelles, similar to what Militaires Sans Frontières did in *Peace Walker*. This time around, though, you don't just get to see it when it's under attack – Mother Base is a whole region of the game open to exploration. It becomes home to numerous characters you can interact with, all the soldiers you welcome into the Diamond Dogs, many jeeps to pootle around in and all the hidden little elements and asides you would expect from a Kojima game. It even has showers to wash off the blood Snake ends many missions covered in – and even that has an in-game application, refreshing mind and body to allow for calmer aiming and a slightly longer reflex window, among other things. While in some ways this is still as incoherent as any *Metal Gear Solid* that has come before, it's surprising just how much makes perfect sense throughout *The Phantom Pain*.

Populating Mother Base can be achieved in a hands-off fashion, or you can once again employ the wonderful Fulton recovery system. Knocking out an enemy troop, you can attach a balloon to them and see them removed from the field and returned to home base. Some might need 'persuading' in the brig, some might be happy to be free of the mercenary group they were once working for, some might be freed prisoners, even child soldiers – all have a place in Diamond Dogs. As you work through the game and see both your private army and Mother Base grow, there's a real sense of ownership to proceedings. *You* have built this, these are *your* people – you actually start to care about them, in a way. Even when you are punching them in the face to raise their morale, which is literally something you can do.

FAQs

Q. HOW BIG IS IT?
Huge. Massive. Gigantic. Two massive playgrounds of stealthy destruction and one home base (that's also huge) – there's a lot to get lost in.

Q. ARE THERE BOSS FIGHTS?
Yes, and they're just as *Metal Gear*-y as you might expect. Though without needing to switch ports with your pad.

Q. REALLY THE LAST ONE?
With Kojima at the helm, yes – it looks that way. But Konami wants to continue the *MGS* series without its creator.



Right: Those who played *Ground Zeroes* will have a good feel for what to expect from *The Phantom Pain*. But one thing is for certain in this bulked-up release: nobody will be finishing it in five minutes.





Above: Buddies are… well, your buddies on the battlefield. Dogs, robots, horses, others, they all have their individual benefits and employing them on the battlefield can often result in tactical advantages. If you choose wisely, that is.

Below: Cutscenes vary in length, but only really pop up in the core missions and back at Mother Base. Of all the technical improvements, positive changes to the central mechanics and general betterness of *MGSV*, one thing really stands out: you can skip the cutscenes.

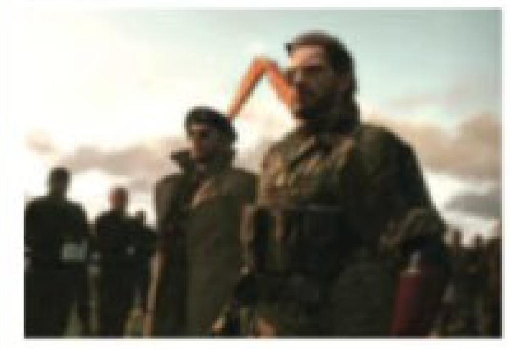




TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

45 MINS



It's a long, playable intro sequence and one that makes you feel a bit confused as to where the rest of the game is going. But worry not; you soon realise you've got a lot of choice here.

8 HOURS



You're settled in to how things work now: you're comfortable enough to experiment, you might even replay missions for higher ranks or go off on side-ops tangents for hours at a time.

14 DAYS

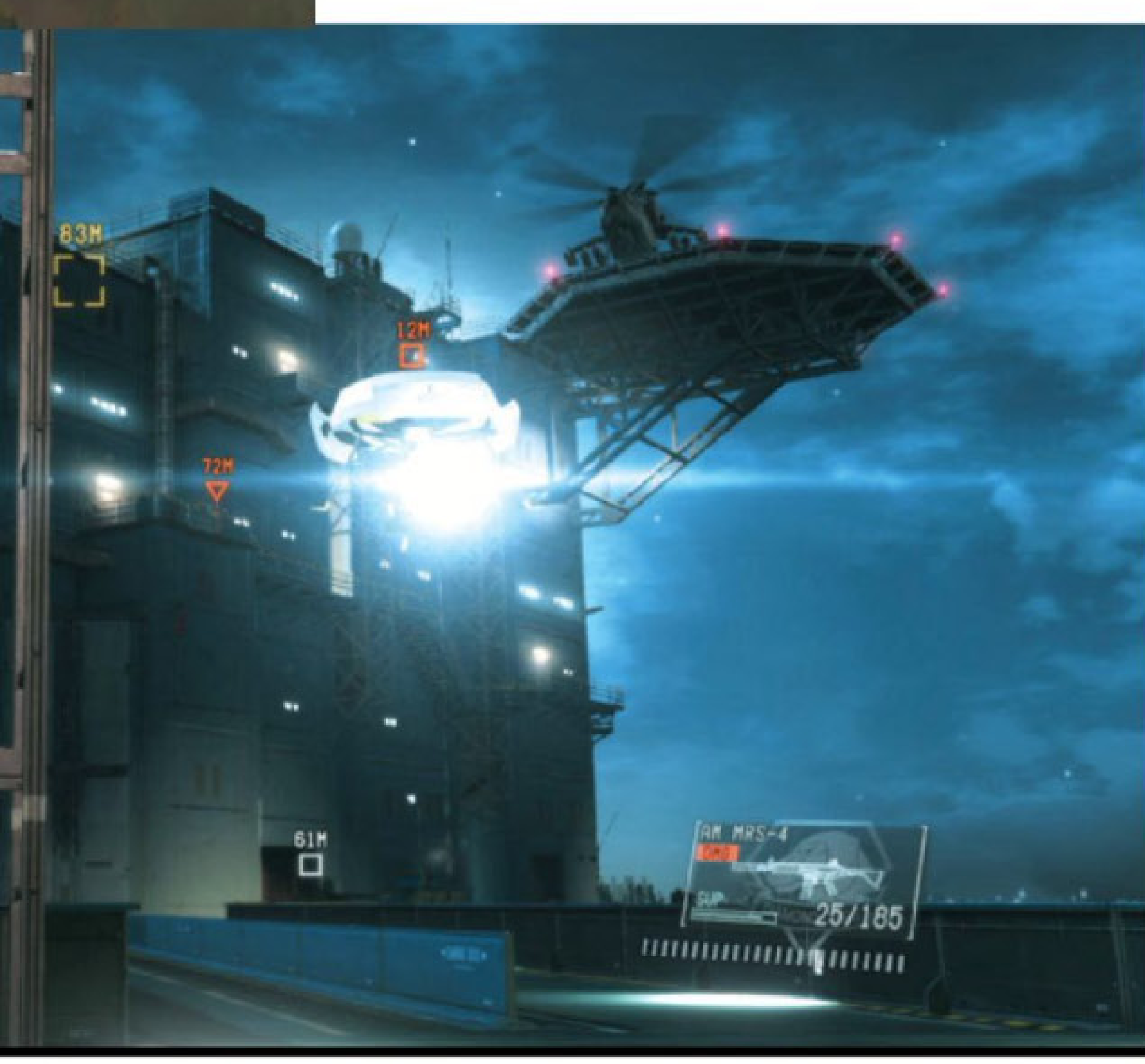


While you likely finished the main story a week ago, the percentage complete ticker is mocking you on the title screen. 44%? Are you kidding us, Kojima Productions? Must do all the things…



GOING GLOBAL

We weren't privy to *MGSV*'s online mode, but we can tell you what we saw of it offline. Basically after a point players are able to build forward operating bases, which allow more combat ops to be undertaken by your soldiers. Building these bases, however, opens you up to the possibility of invasion from another player's forces –think *Dark Souls*, but with more melodrama. The details are fuzzy –and there do look to be microtransactions involved –so this is one element of the game we are unable to offer any concrete opinions on, which is a shame as it looked an interesting addition to the formula. Still, it doesn't take away from how stunning the main package is.



These soldiers aren't just window dressing, though – they can be directly controlled in missions or, as with *Peace Walker*, sent out on combat ops to bring home resources, cash, new recruits and more. Additionally, they can be sent out to disrupt supply lines for items like shotguns, body armour or surveillance cameras – if successful in these real-time dispatches, you will find your main area of operations an easier place to navigate without hassle. Again, it's something that can be totally ignored if you don't feel the need to engage with it. Though the benefits of using combat ops should be clear for anyone to see, if you don't want to bother, you won't be penalised.

You can avoid extracting soldiers should you so choose, but it will be hard for most to resist the lure of nabbing a few animals from the wilderness. Maybe you want a few bears for your mid-ocean animal sanctuary, or a few goats to keep you company – you might even want to pocket a gerbil. And you *can*. While listening to Spandau Ballet's *True* just before encountering a story thread about parasites so utterly lacking in metaphorical subtlety it just *has* to be a joke. *Metal Gear Solid V* is utterly barmy at times, in the best possible way.

Surely it's not all perfect? But of course – there are issues, and some will impact one person more than the other. Certain controls, like when D-Horse ends up in a crevice and can't get out, or where getting up to run away from a shotgun-wielding enemy results in nothing more than another knockdown and death, lead to intense irritation. There's a questionable representation of women throughout the game, with thoroughly ridiculous justifications for Quiet just wearing a bikini and an introduction of an all-female squad carried out at breast height (before moving to bottom height). Is Kojima trolling us? We couldn't help but get that feeling – it definitely feels lascivious, but at the same time it feels like it's done with a wink in the player's direction. All the same, it will be off-putting to some.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

MIX-N-MATCH: *MGSV* certainly doesn't invent any new genres, but it blends together existing ones in such a masterful, inventive way it feels like something new.

But, honestly, that's about it. It would be ludicrous to assume *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* will appeal to everyone, but it is absolutely the best game in the series – and one of the best games we've ever had the privilege of playing. It's an incredible exercise in scope and player freedom, rewarding you for playing with, mixing and modifying its core mechanics. This might well be Kojima's last ever *Metal Gear*, but he and his team at Kojima Productions are going out on the highest of highs.

VERDICT

KOJIMA'S LAST IS METAL GEAR'S BEST. ASTOUNDING.

10 gamesTMmag scored **10** for Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



TAKE ON MIYAMOTO AT HIS OWN GAME

Super Mario Maker

Above: Eventually you can unlock different sounds (including the option to record your own) and special effects that can be programmed to trigger at certain moments, such as this massive cat's paw that swats away enemies any time you kill them.

Very few game franchises have stuck so closely to their roots over the years as *Super Mario Bros.* has. Put the 1985 original next to 2012's *New Super Mario Bros U* and while some elements – the visual detail, the power-ups, the enemies – may be different, the core gameplay remains exactly the same, right down to Mario's jump height.

Nowhere is this made more clear than in *Super Mario Maker*. After using its delightfully approachable tools to create your own 8-bit NES *Super Mario Bros.* stage, with just one stylus tap you can instantly transform everything into the modern *New Super Mario Bros* style (or, should you prefer, *Super Mario Bros 3* or *Super Mario World*). It's impressive seeing 27 years of progress in the blink of an eye, but it also provides a warm feeling: the more things have changed, the more they've stayed the same.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 11 September
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

IT'S POSSIBLE TO PUT TOGETHER A RUDIMENTARY STAGE IN AS LITTLE AS A MINUTE OR TWO

On paper, *Super Mario Maker* is a simple concept: it's a 2D Mario level editor that lets you make your own stages and share them online. What's less clear until you start playing is the level of love and detail that has gone into every element of the software, from its presentation to its brilliantly simple interface.

Nintendo may not have realised it while it was initially developing the Wii U hardware, but this is the game the GamePad was created for. Creating new levels from scratch is an absolute cinch: a dropdown menu at the top of the screen brings up a host of icons representing gameplay elements – blocks, enemies, power-ups, hazards and the like – and adding them to the stage is a simple matter of choosing an icon with the stylus then tapping wherever you want to put it. It's possible to put together a rudimentary stage with platforms, some question blocks, a few Goombas and an exit flagpole in as little as a minute or two, and while such a stage will hardly be any great shakes it's a testament to the intuitiveness of the toolset provided that creating something similar in, say, a *LittleBigPlanet* game would be a far more fiddly and time-consuming affair.

Naturally, *Super Mario Maker* is not as complex as Media Molecule's PlayStation platformer creation series. Rather than being a drawback, however, this actually works in the game's favour: when you aren't overwhelmed by countless options it's easier to consider what's available to you and what's

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE SPECIAL EDITION?

It comes with an 8-bit Mario amiibo which lets you add a massive mushroom that turns Mario huge.

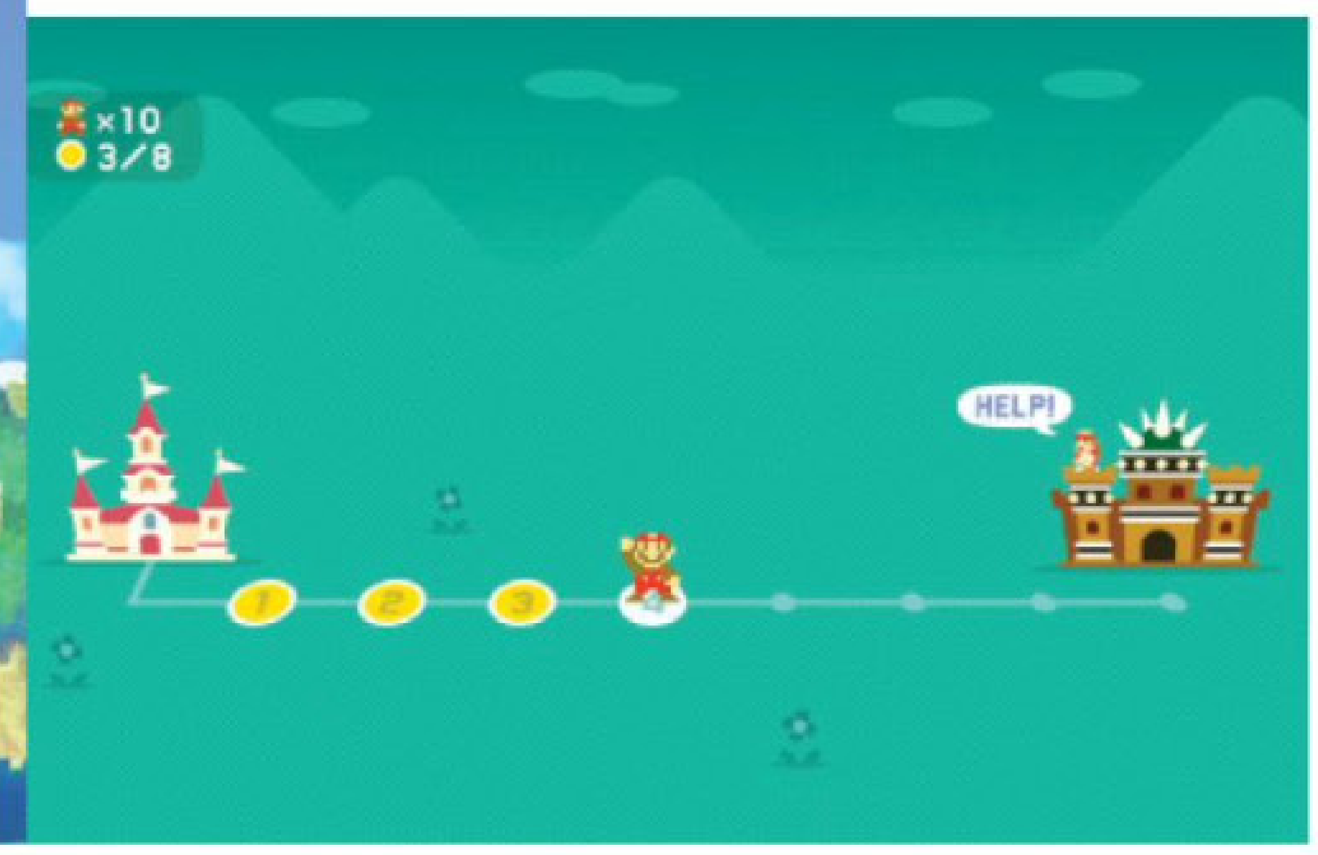
Q. CAN YOU COMBINE ITEMS?

Yes. Drag a mushroom onto a Goomba and it'll grow, or give a springboard wings and it'll fly.

Q. ARE ITEMS ERA-SPECIFIC?

Some are (like the Raccoon Leaf and Super Cape) but others like Bowser Jr have new 8-bit versions.





Below: The 10 Mario Challenge unlocks a variety of template stages that can be edited as inspiration for your own creations.

Below: You can mess around with enemies to make creations never before seen in a *Mario* game. That 'three Bowsers stacked on top of a Wiggler boss fight you always dreamed about can finally now become a reality, you lucky devil.







possible with what you're given. The game takes this idea one step further by staggering the availability of the tools over a couple of weeks when you first start playing: rather than giving you everything in one go, it adds new icons, elements and options on a daily basis. For example, this gives you a day to get used to the *Super Mario Bros.* engine and the fundamental Mario elements – mushrooms, question blocks, Koopa Troopas and the like – before adding the *New Super Mario Bros* engine, then underwater stages and enemies, then castle environments and so on until eventually you're given more complex options like custom sound effects, screen scroll speed, path settings and the like.

The result is a piece of software that actually offers very little in the way of forced tutorials (though there is a beautifully designed electronic manual should you need one), instead giving you time to mess around with each batch of tools in manageable quantities.

The stage creation is a joy, then, but as the title screen's two options make clear, making levels is only half of the *Super Mario Maker* package: the real fun comes in sharing these stages online and downloading other players' designs. The Course World section offers a regular stream of user-made levels, ranging from the inventive to the nigh-on impossible (but never entirely unbeatable: creators are required to clear their own levels before being allowed to upload them).

There are all manner of measures in place to ensure well-made stages are pushed to the top, such as a Featured section and one that lists the top courses in order of Stars (the game's equivalent of 'Likes'). Every player is also initially limited to having ten stages uploaded to the server until they earn enough Stars to unlock a larger allowance, thereby preventing the possibility of some gamers filling the service with countless throwaway five-minute efforts.

It's only when you dip into other players' imaginative play stages you would never have dreamt of making that *Super Mario Maker*'s true value becomes clear. In the first day alone we came across the likes of a *Pac-Man* inspired stage that was rather ingenious, a recreation of the notorious underwater level from the NES *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game and a stage called Winners Don't Do Shrooms which forced us to unlearn 30 years of habit by avoiding a barrage of mushrooms in order to fit through a tiny gap at the end of the very clever level.

The game isn't without flaws, though they're negligible. Some of the items you can place are made superfluous thanks to the lack of a progression-based system: you can put down 1-Up mushrooms but since you get infinite attempts at each stage they're rendered pointless. It would also be nice to have seen more legacy power-ups like the Tanooki suit, Frog suit, P-Balloon and Penguin suit, which could have offered even more level design possibilities. Perhaps DLC?

Super Mario Maker takes one of the most beloved franchises in gaming history and gives it one of the most intuitive level editors ever seen, one flexible enough to allow for countless possibilities. It's bursting with charm, contains some real laugh-out loud moments and is essential for any Mario fan.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

SPEAK UP: Every level you upload gets it own Miiverse thread, allowing players to pause at any point during gameplay and comment. These then appear for other players, *Dark Souls* style.

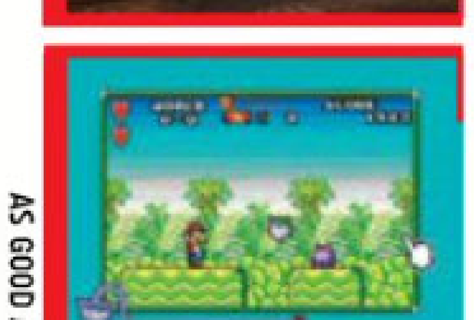
SUPER CAMEO BROS

The Mystery Mushroom power-up turns Mario into one of 100 characters/items when he picks it up, from sprites like Question Blocks and Goombas to characters like Link, Kirby or a Pikmin. Many can be unlocked with amiibos – the *Wii Fit* Trainer one will add that character to the roster and won't need to be scanned again – but others need to be unlocked by completing the 100 Mario Challenge, a mode that picks eight random user-created levels and gives you 100 lives to beat them. Each time you do you unlock a new Mystery Mushroom outfit for the *Super Mario Bros* style levels.

BETTER THAN

LITTLEBIGPLANET 3





AS GOOD AS

WARIOWARE D.I.Y.

VERDICT

AN OUTSTANDING PIECE OF CREATIVE SOFTWARE

IT'S A RADIO-PLAY... DONE IN CRYENGINE!

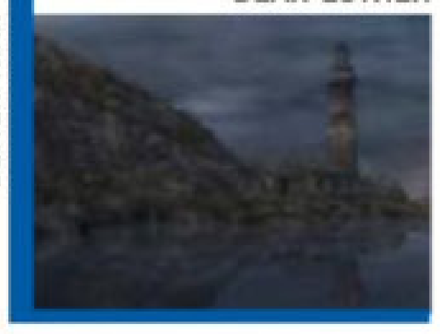
Everybody's Gone To The Rapture

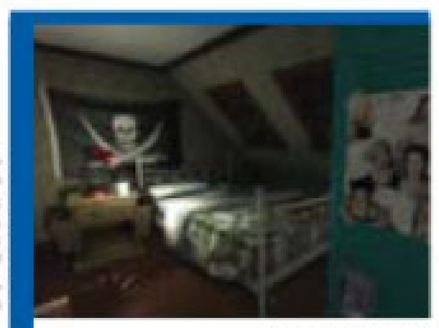
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: The Chinese Room
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DEAR ESTHER





GONE HOME

AS GOOD AS

'Can The Chinese Room's low-key style be sustained over five to six hours?' That was the question we've been asking ourselves since we first heard of *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*. The reason the studio's previous games worked so well was because of their brevity: seminal hit *Dear Esther* was as 'short form' as games have gotten. It was a game about language, interpretation, slowing down, self-reflection. That worked within its fleeting campaign, but *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*... it loses some of that impact because of its length.

But it's unfair to hold The Chinese Room's newest endeavour up against its past efforts: the games are incredibly different, despite their similar presentation. That's because *Rapture* focuses on a more human story – it dwells on the dirt under the fingernails, examining the beauty in the tedium of English village life. *Rapture* perfectly captures the quintessentially English intricacies of 'small town syndrome' in the rural climes of Shropshire.

The way the 'characters' you meet start to form appearances in your head as you see them interact is brand new in gaming: it's like all the best bits of a Radio 4 audioplay mixed in with the graphical presentation of a visual novel: the 'people' in the game are nothing more than light artefacts, bioluminescent mannequins acting out memories. The voice work supporting the lightshow is permanently impressive – we thought we'd tire of the drama over the five hours it took us to finish the game, but the script and the acting combined kept us rapt.

But what is a script and the acting keeping it afloat without a story? That's where *Rapture*



Above: *Rapture* is a very un-patronising game – so much detail is hidden in the environments, it makes exploring a key narrative tool and mechanic

Below: The light aberrations and anomalies act as your guides (in a sense) and the patterns they make look distressingly like they follow the Golden Ratio...





FAQs

Q. CAN I RUN?
No. You can speed up a little bit with momentum, but that's about it sadly.

Q. CAN I MEET PEOPLE?
Sort of – you can meet physical manifestations of their memories shown in space/time by strange light-based phenomena.

Q. CAN I DO MUCH ELSE?
Nope. If you're feeling particularly adventurous, you can interact with a train set or jump on a playground ride, but that's about it.

Below: The pubs are amazingly lifelike – even waiting three minutes to get served feels like a treat as you soak in the atmosphere



RAPTURE IS LIKE A MIKE LEIGH FILM WRITTEN BY STEPHEN KING – AT ONCE DOMESTIC AND RELATABLE BUT LACED WITH SCI-FI FLOURISHES

flashes another piece of its genius – there are various ways the narrative is uncovered by the player: from radio broadcasts from one of the game's more enigmatic characters, to individual 'sprites' that lead the player from event to event, to simple environmental storytelling beats scattered around the fantastic setting of Yaughton.

The story itself is like a Mike Leigh film written by Stephen King – it's at once domestic and relatable whilst being laced with these sci-fi flourishes that anyone that's ever read *The Stand* or watched *Threads* will be able to place in the spectrum of apocalypse fiction. That's not to devalue what *Rapture*'s doing, though: the story it's telling hasn't really been told before, especially not in this format, and that alone makes the game worth checking out. We had more emotional resonance with this than we have with much else that's come out on the PS4 (*Life Is Strange* notwithstanding).

Thing is, despite what the game, its narrative and its graphical presentation is doing for the videogame medium, there remains one problem – the minimalism of the mechanics. We understand the process behind having one (one!) active button – X lets you 'interact' – but at times, the game seems too languid for its own good. While it's nice to be able to walk around slowly and let the shifting day/night cycle sink into your eyes, when you know your next objective is over a field or back on that road you've already trekked across twice, you do find yourself wishing you moved a little quicker. Even with the patching in of a 'run button' (it's more like a 'brisk walk' button, to be honest), the game still seems to become a little arrhythmic at times, because you can't make the story keep up with how quickly you want to consume it.

We understand that the game is operating within the genre that The Chinese Room set up – the 'walking simulator' – but at times that impacts too heavily on what the story seems to want us to do. Once you've found a certain light aberration and activated it, seeing how that character's story plays out – right until the bitter end – there's a sense of urgency, a sense of wanting to uncover more before the dust settles and your agency is once again bled out by the slightly-too-slow pacing.

This singular issue would be a lot more persistent if it weren't for the game's sublime soundtrack – at times it actually takes over the CryEngine graphics and makes the game itself feel like a visual accompaniment to the orchestral arrangements that infuse everything in-game with this soft, eldritch glow. The music somehow makes the mundane into the uncanny: the way tracks dynamically trigger when you happen across certain conversations or crest a hill to see certain vistas reminds us of what Rocksteady was doing with *Arkham Knight*'s camera trickery – it's the audio equivalent, and no less impressive from a technical standpoint.

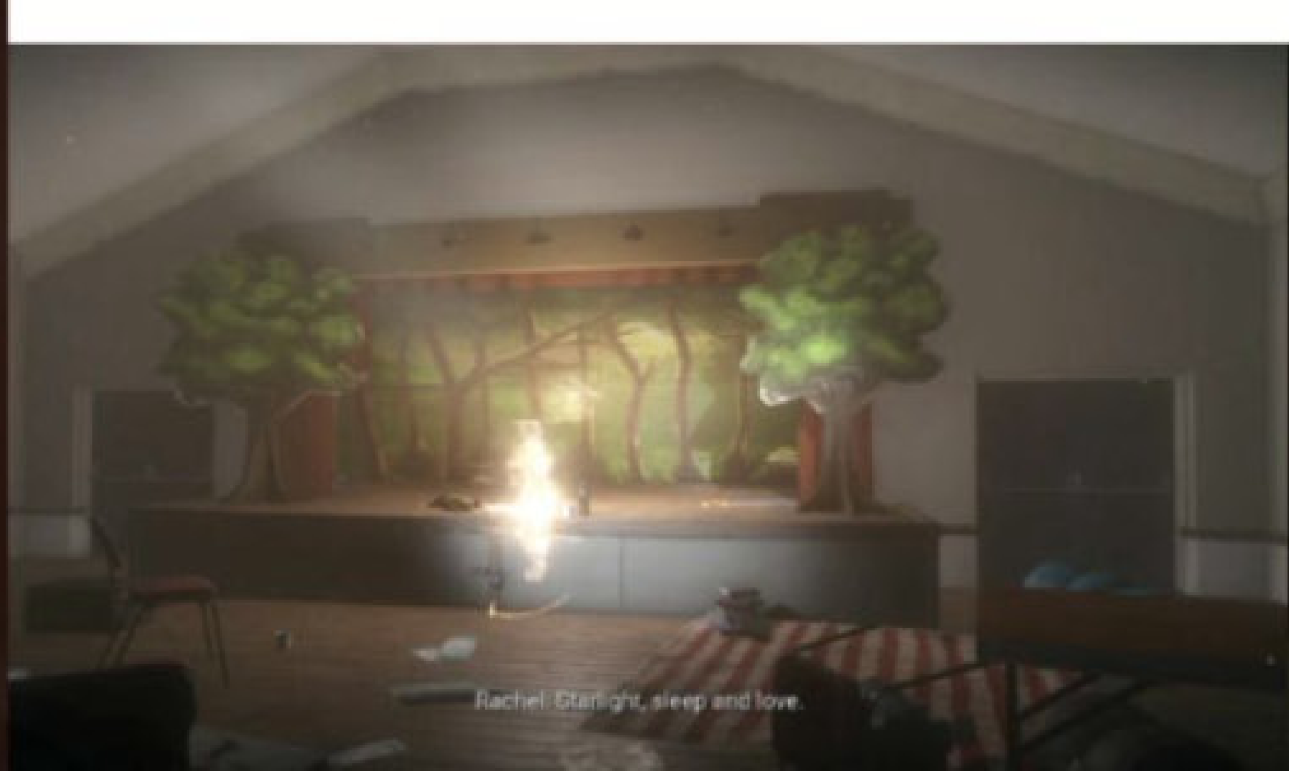
Everybody's Gone To The Rapture is a brave experiment, and one that's paid off for The Chinese Room. If you're a console-only gamer, it'll be unlike anything you've ever played before – we say that with admiration. *Rapture*'s primary function is not to tell you a story, but to get you to tell one to yourself, and to make you care about it. That's a lofty goal, and the game manages to achieve that. And therein lies its accomplishment: we honestly can't say many games are well-*written*, but The Chinese Room has proven that it's perfectly possible to achieve.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STORY PARTICLES: This is a game about light – spiritual light, physical light and metaphorical light. To that end, the light particle effects and the way the night-time sky box is rendered are phenomenal.

A-trophy-ing Time

The trophies the game has on offer are a clear indicator as to how it wants you to play – the vast majority of awards (all easy to get, Trophy Hunters!) require you to wait. Interact with one thing, wait for another, hang around in certain areas for long enough, ride a playground apparatus for a while… it all ties into the mellow countryside vibe the game does so well to recreate. Our personal favourite is the 'waiting three minutes for a pint' trophy in both the game's country pubs (where a pint of real ale is only 50p!).
You might want to revise this list before you jump into the game, because the trophies can be quite time-consuming and (bonus!) you *can* grab them all in a single playthrough.





VERDICT
A LANDMARK FOR WRITING, HELD BACK BY MINIMALISM

gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Everybody's Gone To The Rapture
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM... SORT OF

Devil's Third

It's rare that a game that's suffered years of development hell eventually pulls itself up by its bootstraps and delivers a fantastic experience. While there have been exceptions – *Team Fortress 2* took eight years to make, and *The Last Guardian* also looks set to buck the trend – for the most part you only need to look at the likes of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, *Duke Nukem Forever* and *Too Human* to see evidence that troubled development tends to lead to a mediocre release. *Devil's Third*, sadly, nestles all too comfortably into this list.

Originally started five years ago and planned as an Xbox 360 and PS3 game, *Devil's Third* has been subjected to version cancellations, publisher closures (it was initially a THQ game) and numerous entire engine changes. The result is a game that, while not entirely hopeless, shows some real signs of battle damage.

The plot – at least at first – gets top marks for originality. A Soviet force has been dropping debris from satellites orbiting the Earth, which in turn has led to the Kessler effect: a chain reaction of collisions that ultimately lead to the destruction of practically all civilian and military satellites. The Soviets then detonate a few nukes high in the Earth's atmosphere, rendering all electronic equipment useless. With the world plunged into chaos and all military outfits forced to resort to basic 'boots on the ground' manpower, the Soviets put their plan for a worldwide revolution into action. It's up to Ivan, a heavily tattooed Russian, to put a stop to things.

Designed by *Dead Or Alive* and *Ninja Gaiden* director Tomonobu Itagaki, *Devil's Third* lacks the jaw-dropping visuals of the former and the tight combat of the latter. Its mix of third-person fisticuffs and first-person gunplay feels more like the sort of game that you would have expected to see a few years into the previous generation. A few quirky sub-sections aside, for the most part gameplay involves moving from one targeted location to the next, beating up or gunning down any enemies you come across between points A and B. There's very little strategy involved, and the AI is generally lacking in 'I'.

Combat is surprisingly basic given that this is from the man behind the *Ninja Gaiden* games. There are light and heavy attack buttons, but the number of combos available to you is severely limited. Things are mixed up a little with the ability to pick up melee weapons, but there are only a few of these, and the preset 'final blow' animations already start to feel repetitive just a couple of missions into the campaign.

Shooting fares a little better, though it's clearly in nowhere near the same league as more

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Valhalla Game Studios
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 28 August
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: Each weapon has its own special 'finishing blow' animation. These can get a little repetitive but you're invulnerable while you perform them which, with clever timing, makes it possible to recover health while fighting against large groups of enemies.



ONLINE SAVIOUR?

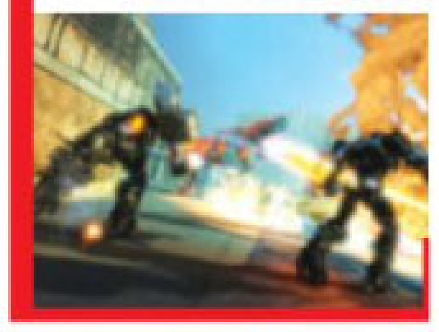
The online multiplayer in *Devil's Third* – which was unavailable for testing at the time of review – supports up to 16 players and is something Valhalla is adamant is a major mode. Unfortunately, given the slim chance of Wii U owners rushing out and buying it in their droves, it seems its potential may never be met. This may be why Valhalla is planning to release the online mode as a standalone, free-to-play game on PC later this year. It makes for an interesting situation: should the multiplayer prove as compelling as Valhalla seems to think it is, *Devil's Third* may yet see a level of success that will make up financially for its rough and lengthy development.

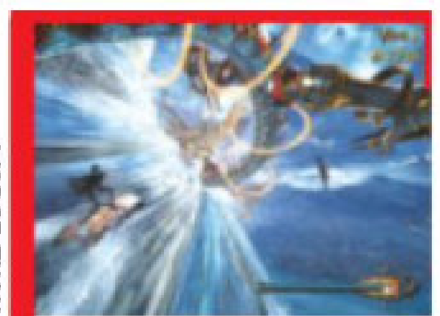




BETTER THAN

TRANSFORMERS: RISE OF THE DARK SPARK





WORSE THAN

BAYONETTA 2

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S WITH THE TATTOOS?

They tell the Japanese story of a monk who had his ears torn off by a ghost.

Q. SERIOUSLY?

Yes. They also have special powers, and can store defeated enemies' life force.

Q. IS IT GORY?

A little. Equip the samurai sword, Ivan will slice opponents in two, more often than not.

accomplished FPS franchises. Aiming feels a little rigid, with no momentum in the movement of your crosshairs, but it's generally satisfying to pick off distant enemies and see them explode in a rather needless shower of crimson. The standard cover-based gameplay gets tiresome, and some weapons take too long to reload, but for the most part the shooting action serves a purpose and does so competently enough.

The engine itself does not fare so well, unfortunately. Throughout the game's troubled development, Itagaki's studio, Valhalla, was forced to entirely change gameplay engines a number of times through no fault of its own. The closure of the company that provided its first engine forced a move to the *Darksiders II* engine. Then, following THQ's closure, Valhalla had to subsequently transfer the game over to Unreal Engine 3.

MISSING LINK

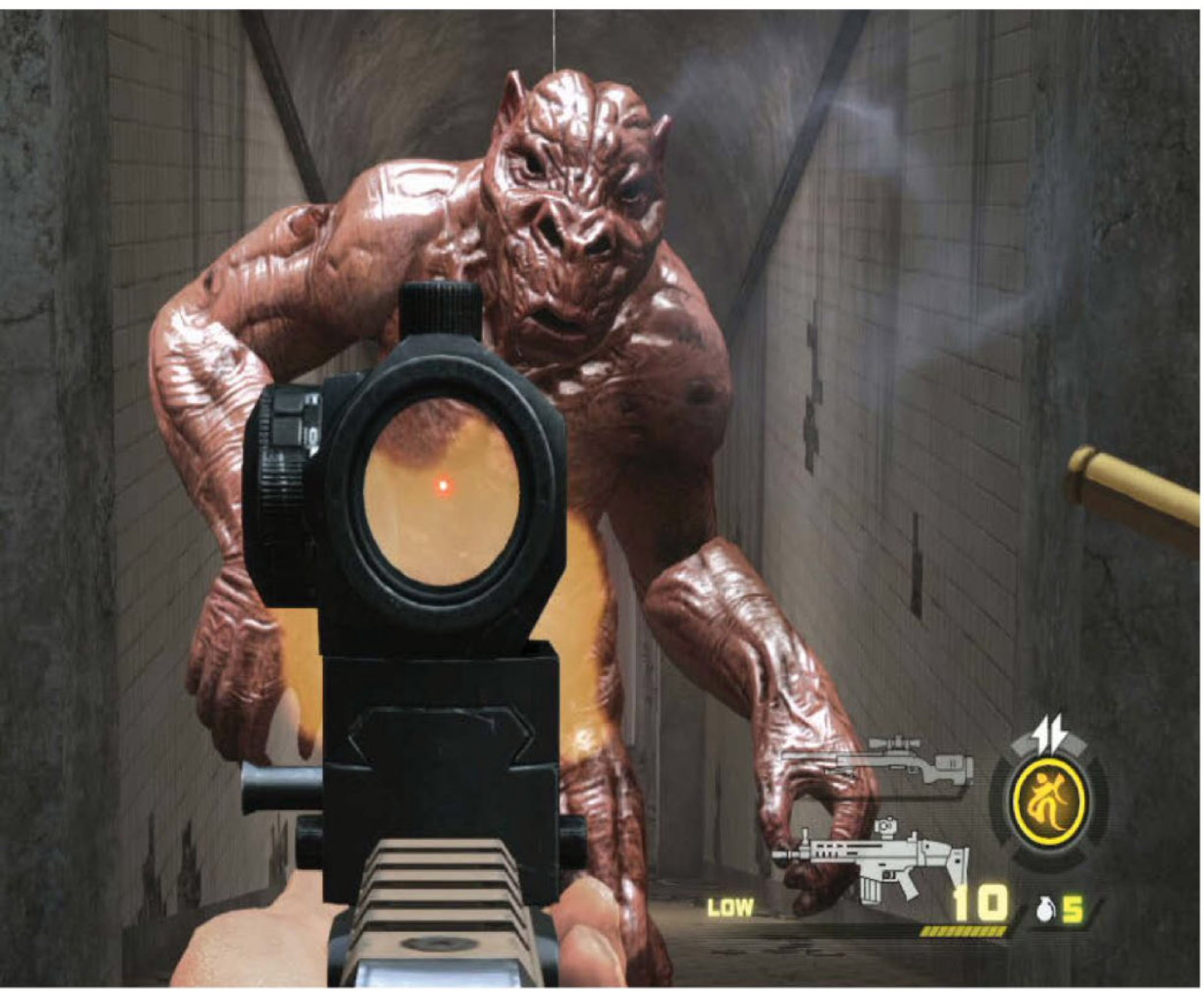
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BOSS BATTLES: The boss fights are monotonous, with lots of diving around and chipping away at needlessly large energy bars. They feel old-fashioned, which is saying something in a game like this.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the consequences of these constant wholesale engine migrations are evident throughout. Textures often start blurry and draw themselves in, character models vary wildly in detail, and the frame rate is erratic at best, resembling a slideshow at worst. Given the game's history, it's perhaps understandable, but that doesn't make it acceptable considering it's a game that, graphically, the Wii U is capable of handling.

Its Xbox and PlayStation roots are also apparent in its failure to make real use of any of the Wii U's unique features. The GamePad is little more than an oversized DualShock for the purposes of this game, with the ability to transfer the action from the TV to its screen the only option. While twin-stick controls are obviously tried and tested, it's hard not to feel a little disappointed that there's no gyro-based aiming

COMBAT IS SURPRISINGLY BASIC GIVEN THAT THIS IS FROM THE MAN BEHIND THE NINJA GAIDEN GAMES



system: with *Splatoon* still a regular fixture in many Wii U systems, the lack of gyro controls only makes this feel even more archaic.

And yet, despite all this, there's something oddly moreish about *Devil's Third*. It may be the way the plot gets truly bizarre, starting with a *Kill Bill*-style revenge plot, moving on to mutants and proceeding in a way we wouldn't dare spoil. It could be the charmingly over-the-top voice acting or the sort of I-don't-care-who-I-offend attitude Itagaki's games often exude. Or maybe it's just that its combat, while simplistic and repetitive, is nevertheless strangely satisfying, making you want to go back and play more of it even though there are plenty of better games out there.

For some reason, though *Devil's Third* is guilty of multiple wrongs, they seem to somehow come together to make a right, at least to a degree. In no way, shape or form should it be considered a classic Wii U game, but there's every chance its shamelessly last-gen presentation will earn it something of a retro following. It's very much the gaming equivalent of a B-movie, with ropey production values and countless rough edges, and yet an underlying charm that will at least appeal to some.

VERDICT

TECHNICALLY SHAMBOLIC BUT APPEALING IN AN ODD WAY



Above: The entire compilation is wrapped in a gorgeous theatre-style menu system that presents each game with its own splash screen.

A TREASURE TROVE OF CLASSICS FOR POCKET CHANGE

Rare Replay

30 games from one of the world's most loved developers is surely worth at least £50, right? And yet, you can pick up this immense collection for under twenty quid. Not just that, but *Rare Replay* offers a lot more than just a simple list of titles. Retro compilations will surely never be the same again.

Rare Replay spans 25 years of Rare history, from the developer's humble beginnings on the ZX Spectrum in 1983, through its days as a top-tier Nintendo developer on NES, SNES and N64, and finishing up with its Xbox 360 releases up to 2008. All of this is wrapped up in a theatre-themed menu system with a quirky papercraft-inspired visual style and remixed classic game songs that make up one beautiful presentation.

What becomes immediately apparent as you scroll through the immense 30-game list is how bold and experimental Rare has been over the years. From gritty shooters and racing games, to colourful platformers and pet sims, Rare clearly has a rich history of bold game development and that really shines through in this bundle.

There's no question of value here. The three-game *Banjo* series alone offers hundreds of hours of potential gameplay. Throw in both *Perfect Dark* titles, N64 shooter *Jet Force Gemini*, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* and *Kameo*, and you have a pack of brilliant games that puts most other retro compilations to shame. The *Banjo* and *Conker* N64 games in particular hold up remarkably well against modern games, with a bump in resolution and frame rates helping to disguise some of the visual wrinkles that 15-18 years can do to a game. Many gamers will have missed out on the beautifully quirky N64 game *Blast Corps*, so its inclusion in this pack is such a joy and it should be played by everyone.

Rare's later Xbox works, such as *Grabbed By The Ghoulies*, *Kameo* and *Viva Piñata* may not be as widely loved as their Nintendo classics, but are great games regardless and deserve recognition. Delving further back in time, there are some real classics like *R.C. Pro-AM*, *Snake Rattle 'n' Roll* and the brilliant *Battletoads* games. Rare's lesser-known Eighties titles certainly bulk-out the 30-game list, but sadly up against the sheen of modern gaming, most of these older titles have aged pretty poorly. Much of what made games like *Underwurlde* and *Lunar Jetman* difficult were

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Rare
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AN EXTRAORDINARY EXERCISE IN VALUE, AND A CELEBRATION OF AN ACCOMPLISHED GAME DEVELOPER

FAQs

Q. WHY NO DONKEY KONG?

Donkey Kong is sadly a Nintendo property, which meant Rare had to abandon its *DK* works when it joined Microsoft.

Q. XBOX 360 BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY?

Yes, it appears *Rare Replay* offers a first glimpse of the backwards compatibility announced at E3.

Q. ONLINE MULTIPLAYER MODES INTACT?

Yes, all online multiplayer features appear present and correct in the compilation versions.





Below: N64's *Perfect Dark* still stands as an excellent shooter, even if those textures are looking muddy nowadays. Its follow-up, *Perfect Dark Zero*, has its issues, but features some fun innovations.

Below: *Battletoads* stands out as one of the best games among the older 2D titles in this collection. The 1991 NES original and its 1994 arcade-only sequel are renowned for their hard-hitting action and ball-busting difficulty. But with Rewind and enhanced saves, it's pretty forgiving.







their awkward controls and clunky physics – things that all but the most die-hard of pre-Super Nintendo-era Rare fans won't tolerate for more than a few frustrating seconds. Plus, *Perfect Dark Zero* is still a mess, and *Killer Instinct Gold* hasn't aged well at all. But don't let these blemishes detract from the almost unfathomable value on offer here. Rare has gone several steps further with *Rare Replay* to add even more value beyond a simple list of retro titles.

Most of the bundle's old 2D games benefit from the ability to rewind time, allowing gamers to backtrack from minor slip-ups. This is a brilliant touch that couples with a save-anywhere feature and, for some titles, an infinite lives option, to make even the most brutal of its retro offerings a lot more tolerable. Yes, it's cheating, but if there was that one level or boss you could never beat back in the day, using these tools to enact your long-awaited revenge will be no less sweet. The 2D titles can also be played with a neat retro visual filter that adds a remarkably genuine-looking CRT TV look, complete with scanlines and curved edges.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

REWIND: *Lunar Jetman* was impossible, but with rewind suddenly we're awesome at it.
SAVE ANYWHERE: Even if you're against rewinding time, improved saves makes old games more forgiving.

Rare has further enhanced the bundle with Snapshots; mini challenges with specific goals or tasks to be completed within limited time or number of lives. In addition, a Playlists option groups Snapshots from multiple games by a specific theme – such as finding the exit, collecting gems or killing enemies – and has you tackle them all consecutively with a set number of lives. This is a great way to enjoy many of the older games in bite-size chunks – a far better proposition than sinking hours into a dated, blocky adventure game.

Rare has also added Milestones to each game – an internal achievements system that offers you 'Stamps' based on the completion of certain tasks such as playing all game modes, killing a certain number of enemies or finding in-game items. As your stamp collection grows, your game ranking also increases, and upping your rank unlocks new treats in the Rare Revealed gallery. Rare Revealed is a neat bonus feature that offers a stunning treasure trove of Rare history, including behind the scenes development videos, a look at Rare games that were never released, and even music from games that never saw the light of day.

These enhancements are great, but they don't apply to the Xbox 360 games – which includes the N64 titles that were ported to Xbox 360. These are included in standalone form. They're basically Xbox 360 titles retooled to run on Xbox One via a seemingly early version of its Xbox 360 backwards compatibility. But understandably, none of them benefit from things like Rewind, Snapshots and Playlists. Also worth noting is that the emulation of Xbox 360 for the modern games – particularly *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* – suffers from some performance issues, including poor frame-rates.

For the Rare fan, though, none of the compilation's minor shortcomings will matter. Even with many of Rare's most loved classics missing on account of licensing issues – *GoldenEye 007*, *Donkey Kong Country* to name a couple – *Rare Replay* is still an extraordinary exercise in value, and a fantastic celebration of one of gaming's most accomplished and innovative developers.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Blast Corps is one of those titles that is all too often forgotten, but the N64 game serves as arguably one of Rare's most unique titles, a fantastic inclusion in the *Rare Replay* compilation, and deserving of a spotlight look at what it's all about… *Blast Corps* tasks players with smashing down buildings that lie in the path of a runaway truck carrying a nuclear warhead, but there are no boring bulldozers here. Your wrecking vehicles include a rocket-powered mech suit, a back-flipping robot, a drift car and the A-Team van. You just wreck buildings and nod to cool music.

BETTER THAN

FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD REMASTER



AS GOOD AS



HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

VERDICT

A STUNNING COLLECTION AT ASTONISHING VALUE FOR MONEY

8
gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Rare Replay
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Left: The world around Rae is a blank canvas, and you have to explore to piece together and work out where it is you need to go in order to find Nani.

THE BLIND GAME WITH REAL VISION

Beyond Eyes

You play as a blind girl looking for her cat. That isn't our reductive way of describing *Beyond Eyes* but someone else's, when that person asked what game they were watching after seeing a crowd gather around the office HDTV while **games™** was mid-review. And they are correct. You *do* play as Rae, a blind girl looking for her cat, Nani.

But *Beyond Eyes* offers more than that statement suggests, its immediate strength being the unique art style. The world in *Beyond Eyes* is a white canvas, Rae's exploration and nearby noise helping her fill in the blanks. Sometimes the world isn't what you expect – a distant hum of an engine appears as a car but actually reveals itself to be a lawnmower when you get close enough, the new and immediate threat causing Rae to cower in fear.

Both the gentle pace of Rae and her inability to 'see' more than a few feet ahead means that even a simple area with fences can take a while to navigate, simply because you have to feel your way around the world to find the exit. There's a light puzzle element at play but really, *Beyond Eyes* is an exercise in exploration and experiencing the world more than it is traversing obstacles or gathering clues. Limited interaction with the world means it's often not clear what you need to do to get past any obstacles that do present themselves (barking dogs, aggressive seagulls, and so on) and often the main obstacle to progress is the cautious pace of Rae herself.

It sounds like it's frustrating, and any seasoned gamer might be cringing at what sounds like needless padding, and it's true you'll never want to backtrack simply because Rae's walking speed can turn exploration into a chore if you haven't yet uncovered where to go. But without wanting to come across as too pompous or pretentious, the net effect of these mechanics is that *Beyond Eyes* is something that is *experienced* rather than something that is played. It's melancholy, it's relaxing, it's unusual and it's surprisingly engaging.

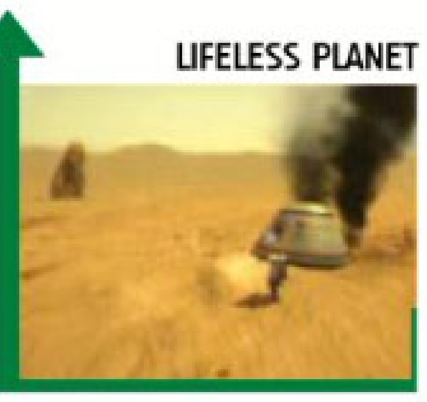
Yet despite how wonderful it is to experience, it's also difficult to wholeheartedly recommend. *Beyond Eyes* isn't going to take longer than a few hours for anyone to complete and the price doesn't quite reflect the brevity of the experience. There are achievements to be unlocked, of course, but *Beyond Eyes* isn't really a game that demands a second playthrough – it doesn't have the narrative secrets of *Gone Home* or the online camaraderie of *Journey*, for example. Even so, if you're after a change of pace on console, *Beyond Eyes* is excellent company for those few hours.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Team 17
DEVELOPER: Tiger and Squid
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LIFELESS PLANET





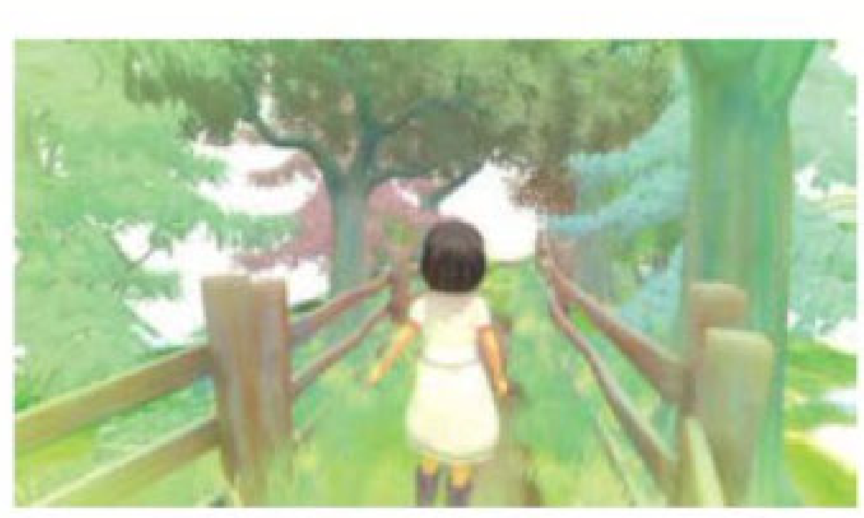
EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

WORSE THAN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE INTERACTION: There are small flourishes of interaction in Rae's world, like feeding cows or chasing chickens across a bridge. We'd like more – the world is gorgeous but you're very detached from it.



VERDICT

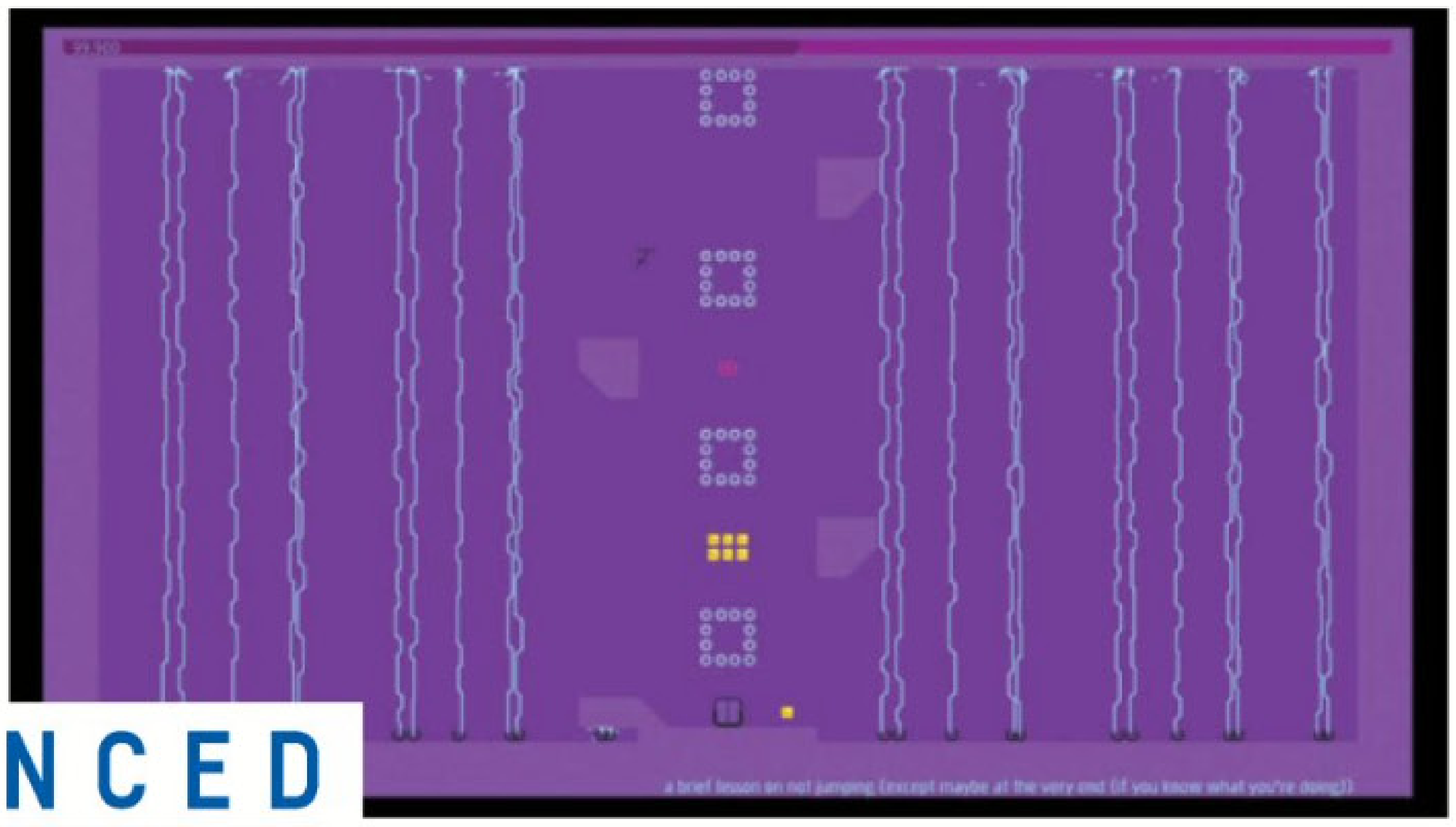
SHORT BUT SWEET

7 gamesTMmag scored **7** for Beyond Eyes

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Expect to see the taunt 'Oops' a lot. As with *Super Meat Boy* before it, the blame here falls squarely on your own inept skills. It's an impossible game to pick up for only five minutes because of the drive to improve.



THE TOTAL SUM OF ITS PARTS

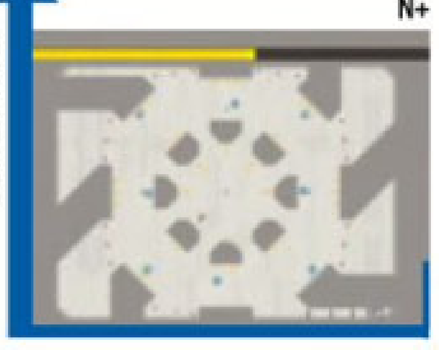
N++

DETAILS

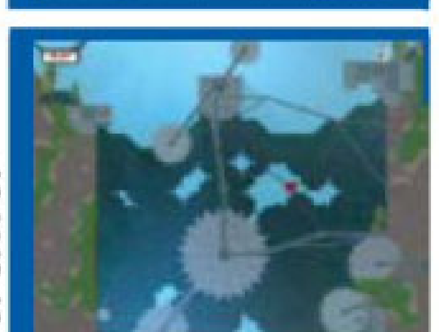
FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Metanet Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

N+



AS GOOD AS



SUPER MEAT BOY

From tiny acorns do great oaks grow; that analogy fits perfectly with *N++*. A title born as a Flash-based browser game over a decade ago, now refined and sculpted into the ultimate package. The core gameplay is unchanged: you still play as a genderless ninja unlocking an exit gate and evading myriad dangers along the way. If you've never played *N* (or its Xbox 360 sequel, *N+*), it is in the *Super Meat Boy* vein of platforming: incredibly hard, but for every death you're rewarded with a greater sense of understanding and eventually satisfaction.

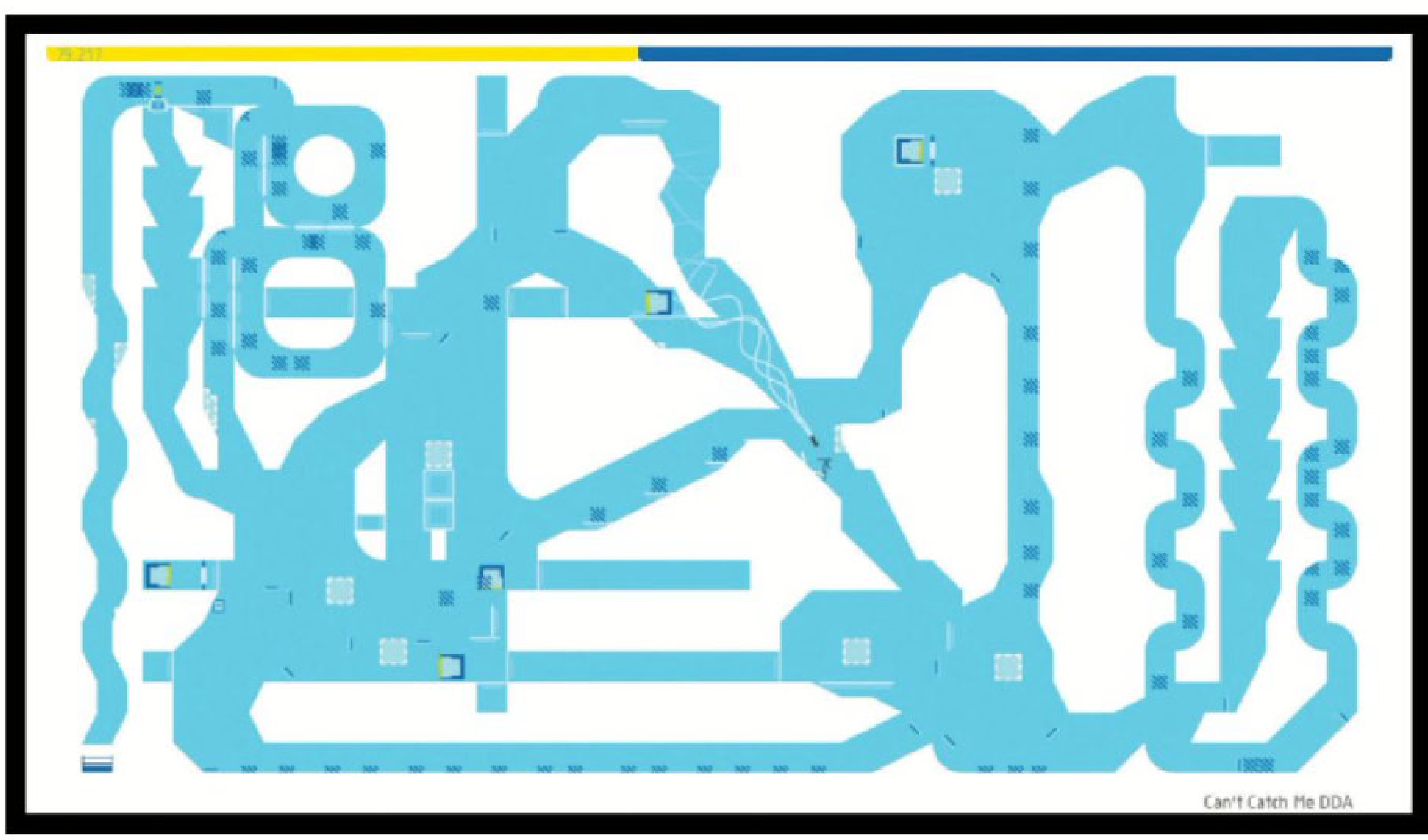
It's a game that is immediately fulfilling, with incredibly honed controls giving you complete command over your tiny ninja's agility. It's an instinctive sort of challenge, and though the puzzle of surviving tougher stages does require a self-discovered solution, it is one that is solved more immediately through a means of trying, failing and trying again. It's one that cajoles your reactions, teasing you to ever-so-slight improvement over the course of even a single stage. Repeated attempts gradually enhance your overall skill, and you'll be able to actually witness yourself improving after each new restart. Those initial, cautious hops from one side of a stage to the other become great bounds as your confidence and appreciation of what is possible become greater and greater. But in truth, all this has always been the case for this series: *N++* does sensibly to keep what makes it so compelling exactly the same.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

AND THE KITCHEN SINK: This is a sequel that has taken everything that was integral to an already brilliant game, tweaked it to perfection and added in a ton of new and important features.

That doesn't mean that *N++* isn't a worthy sequel. There are 2,360 levels to play through, but even ignoring its embarrassment of riches there are still a wealth of new additions. New unlockable and changeable colour palettes add more variety to the traditionally greyscale game, while a huge six hours of atmospheric electronic tunes help zone you into its unique state of mind. The addition of local multiplayer adds a whole new dimension too, bringing a touch of chaos and making for a surprisingly rich couch party title. The fact that both your friends and your own most successful runs on every stage are stored online to be viewed at any time brings a subtle sort of praise; it may well end up being an overlooked feature, but it's one that is imperative to the leaderboard-driven competition. Then there's the level creator: a robust set of tools to build and share your own stages – or play the creations of others – making for a game that is infinite in its offerings, even aside from its sheer number of improvements and additions.

Metanet once described *N++* as being a game they hoped would be so refined and so complete that "there's no need to make another one." We're inclined to agree.



VERDICT
CHALLENGING, REWARDING AND COMPLETE

9 gamesTMmag scored **9** for N++
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

GOTTA PICK A POCKET OR TWO. OR THREE

The Swindle



Roguelikes by their very nature need to be careful with how they frustrate; like an abusive relationship, there's a strange undercurrent of pain running through the pleasure in all the very best roguelikes. With *The Swindle* you're an unspecified group of rogues, darting about steampunk London bashing in robotic guards, hacking vaults and pinching many pennies along the way. The combination of a unique art style - thank god for something *other* than blocky pixel art - and a rather original approach to stealth action gameplay makes *The Swindle* a compelling idea.

The entire game spins around the roguelike conceit of increasing risks: you have 100 days to enter Scotland Yard and pull off the so-named swindle, but since you begin so underpowered and underskilled, you will need to use that time to gather up as many funds as possible, purchase upgrades and unlock tougher locations until you finally have access to that final job. Each new heist is procedurally generated, counting as a single day regardless of how successful it is. It's up to you when to return, however, and so long as you remain undetected you can spend a great deal of time ensuring every last pound is collected. There's a considerable reward for doing so, in fact, an encouraging carrot on a stick that tempts you into fumbling into dangerous situations in the hopes of grasping that final sack of coins. Inevitably, that risk won't pay off, however, and having been detected you will have a mad dash to the exit in the hopes of making off with whatever you have earned so far. It's a great risk/reward system, emboldening a sense of daring escape when it all tumbles down around you.

But *The Swindle* suffers at the hands of its own design. The procedural generation can sometimes spawn stages that are simply impossible to finish, with some vaults being buried underground with no entrances or in rooms that simply can't be escaped with your current set of abilities. The game even admits that this is an issue, telling you early on that some stages can't be completed and the only option is burglar suicide. That in itself would be fine, but that ever-ticking clock of the 100-day limit makes this frustrating; it's an irritation to know you've wasted a day simply because of the game's level generation. Truth be told, this issue is alleviated later on into a campaign once each of the abilities are unlocked, but none of that makes up for the awkward controls. Numerous times you'll die because your thief simply failed to grip the opposite wall or landed in the direct sight of a passing guard after a jump was inexplicably converted into grasping onto the wall beside them. At times, it can be too clunky and a little finicky, but while *The Swindle* is undoubtedly a great idea, games of this ilk can't suffer missteps like infuriating controls – and sadly that does hold this game back.

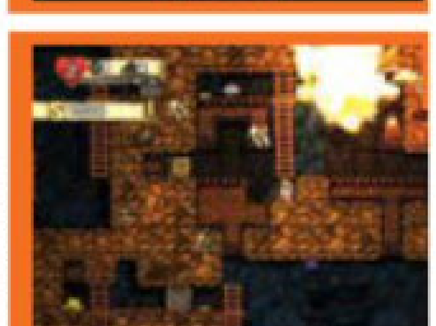
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Curve Digital
DEVELOPER: The Swindle
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.4 GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB GPU, 1GB HDD space, Windows 10 not yet supported
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

STEALTH INC





WORSE THAN

SPELUNKY

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE CONTROLLING: The biggest letdown with The Swindle is simply the fact that it can be rage-inducing when the clunky controls fail you. Fix that, and this brilliant idea could shine.

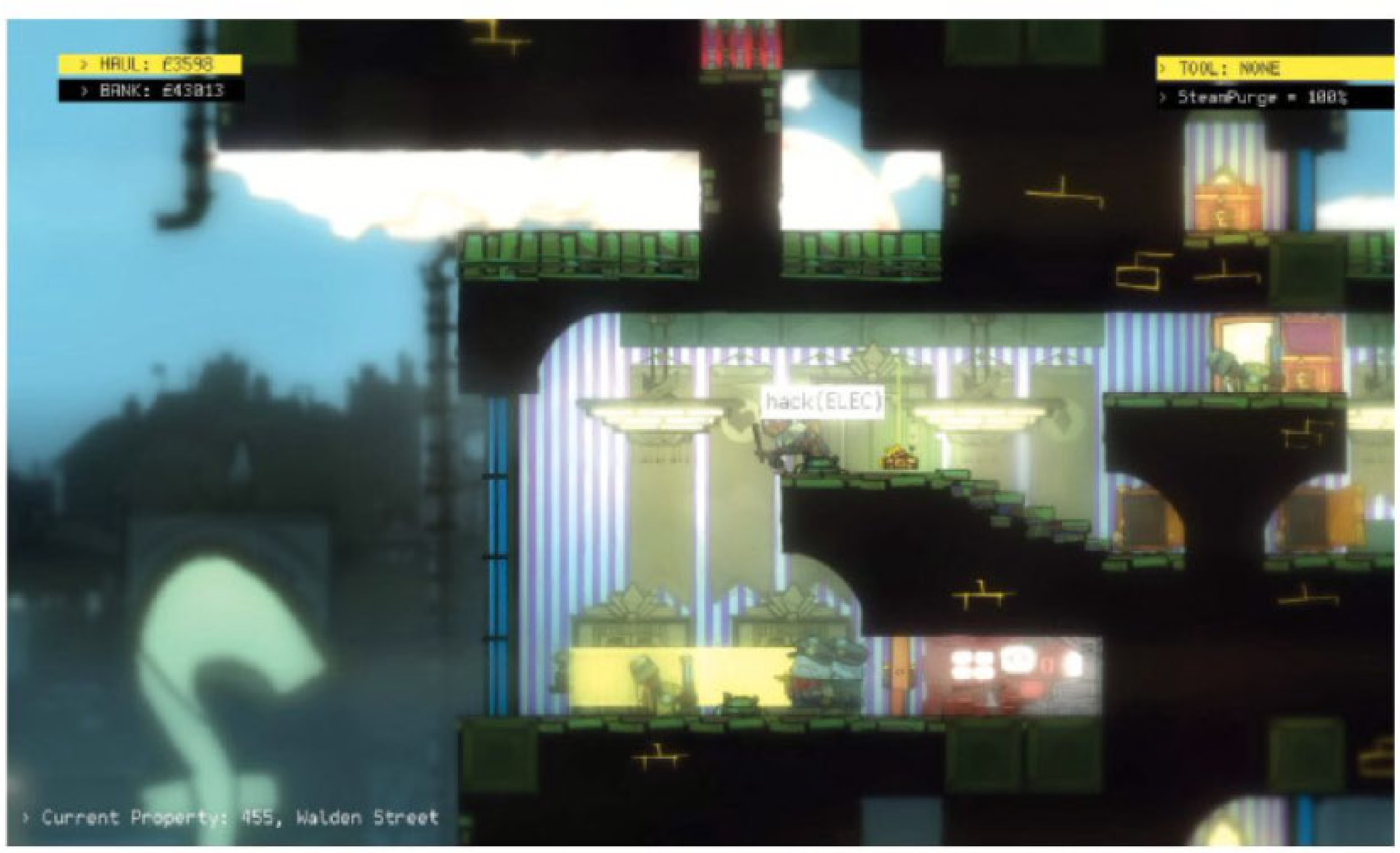
VERDICT

THRILLING WHEN IT WORKS, INCENSING WHEN IT DOESN'T

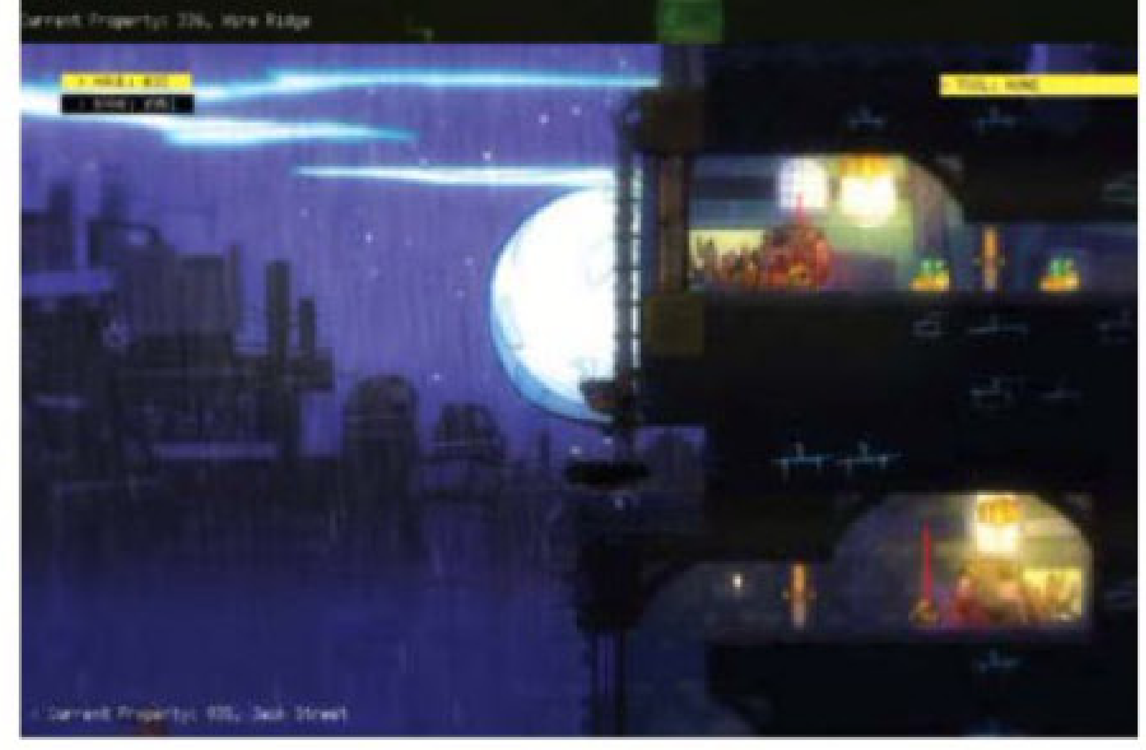
7

gamesTMmag scored **7** for The Swindle

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE







Above: This is a game that thrives on risk. It's always tempting to rush onto the next (much harder) area, but often you'll come up against situations you're just not ready to beat yet. You'll need a couple of runs through a campaign to figure out the perfect strategy.

EMOTIONALLY SCARFED

Journey

When we were playing *Journey*, the whole games™ team got involved. There was only one of us actually playing, but the game is so enchanting, so hypnotic, that eventually it drew the whole team in. It was beautiful on the PS3, but in 1080p resolution and running at 60fps, it's hard not to fall in love with the game's exquisite lighting, dynamic soundtrack and deceptively simple gameplay.

If you already downloaded the game on PS3, it's free for you on PS4. If you don't already own it, go out and buy it – the PS4 version might be a simple remaster, but the graphical improvements go a long way to furthering the impact *Journey* had before. It's a game about immersion – we finished it in one sitting, rapt. That the presentation has been bumped up so much only helps draw you in more, helps you become part of the dreamy, sandy world that *Journey* inhabits.

Sand-surfing down slight inclines, flinging yourself in the air, summoning fabric shreds from ducts… it all still feels ostensibly satisfying, and the way the lighting in-game catches glints of certain bits of sand, how it diffuses against certain fabrics… it remains spellbinding, and the PS4's internal tech pushes these moments to their limit.

That famous scene where you're sliding, side-on, down through a ruined temple, shafts of sunlight illuminating you in-between the pillars that hold the structure up – that looked even more beautiful than before, somehow. Maybe it was the angle of the sun, maybe it was the pace at which we were moving, maybe it was just in our heads. Journey does that to you.

The pseudo-multiplayer aspect of the game is still alive and well, too – something the PS3 version was missing recently, as everyone migrated consoles or found something else to play. This reviewer had never personally played the game before, and thanks to some helpful fellow travellers, we snuck through the temple with that predacious stone fish in it without worry, deftly sliding in and out of all the secret nooks and crannies the level held en route. That's the point of *Journey* – these incredibly personal moments of emergent gameplay that are part of *your* journey, and your journey alone.

Journey is an essential game for any PS4 owner. It's as much a part of the PlayStation legacy as *Ico* is, as *Shadow Of The Colossus* is. Its place in PlayStation legend goes beyond its similar presentation and taps into something more sublime, something more exhilarating. It's a game built of small touches, of small ideas that feed into something much larger than the sum of its parts. It's a game that oozes spirit, and intelligence. It's a game that you absolutely should play.

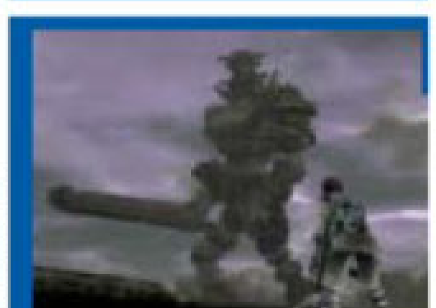
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: thatgamecompany / Sony Santa Monica
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



BETTER THAN

ICO



AS GOOD AS

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS: We encountered nine other players during *Journey*, but you wouldn't have known: we thought there were only about three fellow travellers helping/hindering us!

VERDICT

A PRETTIER, SMOOTHER VERSION OF A CLASSIC

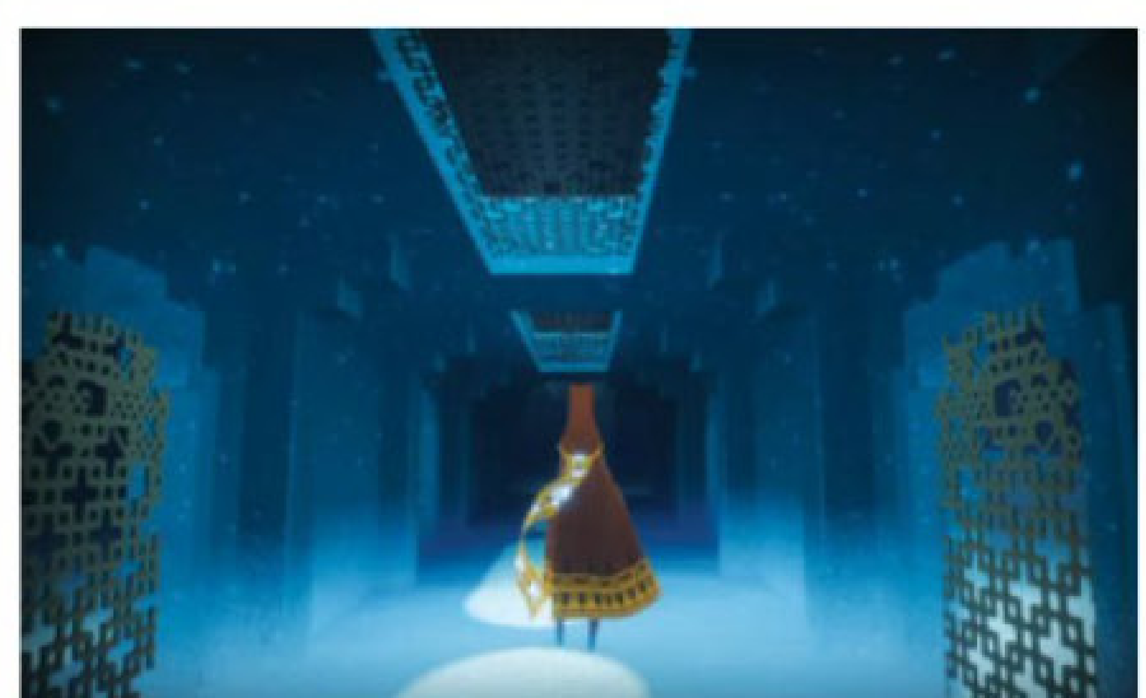
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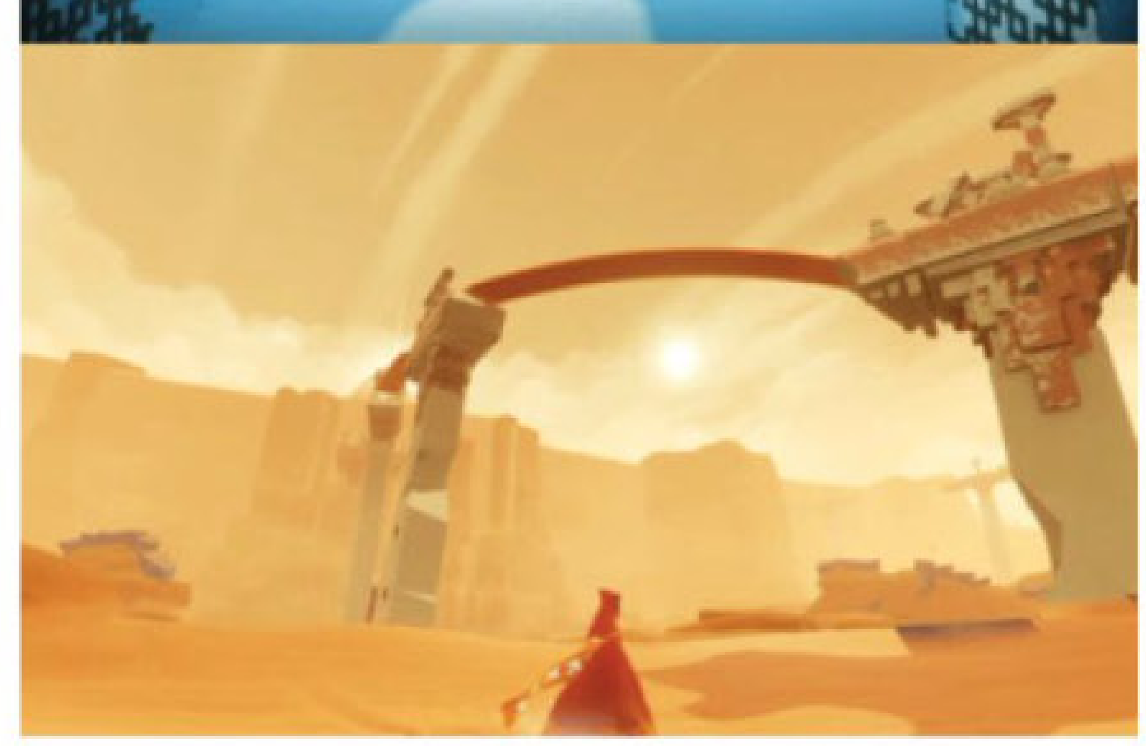
gamesTMmag scored **9** for Journey

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE









Above: We're still instilled with a childish sense of awe whenever we're passing through (or under, or above) the game's temples.





Left: Tembo is at its very best when you are given plenty of opportunity to put your speed to good use. Crashing through enemies, scenery and obstacles is always engaging, thanks to smart placement of jumps and walls.

MAKING SONIC IRRELEPHANT?

Tembo The Badass Elephant

It's hard not to feel a slight sense of sorrow and pity for Sonic, the Sega-blue mascot having fallen so far from fame and public interest that even his creators are turning their backs on him. The cold-shoulder act isn't simply passive, with Sega seeking out ways to replace the hedgehog and cut their losses with what is increasingly becoming a burden that is dragging everything down with it. If Sonic was once Julius Caesar, than Sega is the senate-turned-conspirator.

Tembo, the replacement beast and potential new franchise star, is Brutus - the one to stick the final knife in and, possibly, signal the start of a new empire. The similarities (perhaps not in looks) are numerous enough for any transition to avoid confusion and complication.

Brutus's world is a side-scrolling one, in which emphasis is placed on completing levels both swiftly and smoothly. He is phenomenally quick, for an elephant, with that speed being both the fundamental basis of attack and navigation. His world is filled with objects to charge through and knick-knacks to jump on, all visualised through a colour scheme that will at least once blind anyone without significant acid trip experience. All of this, of course, is equally applicable to those aged *Sonic* outings that are worth playing.

The difference is that Tembo's interpretation of them is freed from the bondage of expectation and nostalgia that has destroyed Sonic. What could have been a stall regurgitation of gameplay tropes comes across as something more creative and singular. While it would be a stretch to the point of insult to describe this as 'unique', it manages to establish its own foundation to build upon.

What it constructs above that foundation is not always solid, though. Being an elephant, Tembo has the luxury of being able to call upon jets of water from his trunk at will and the temptation to distil such a talent into the predictability of faux-puzzles tasking you with extinguishing fire was obviously too great to pass over. As soon as the charging and the smashing is joined and/or replaced by putting out fires, the entertainment factor begins to quickly fizzle out. While Sonic himself has demonstrated that you can't get by forever on a single gimmick, the addition of a water-beats-fire mechanic is so lazy that it makes even the player sleepy.

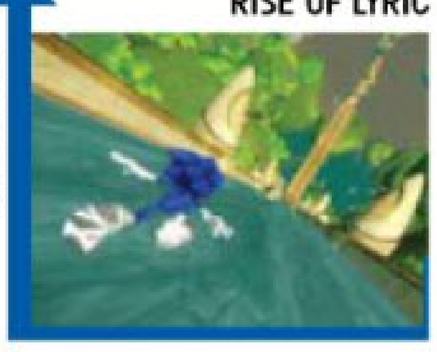
Variety and a change of pace is great, but only when you can't see it coming as clearly as a herd of elephants across an open plain. What's more, the fire itself acts as an excuse to shamelessly include almost every element in the Videogame 101 design handbook circa-1992. It does little to endear you to Tembo's later stages.

DETAILS

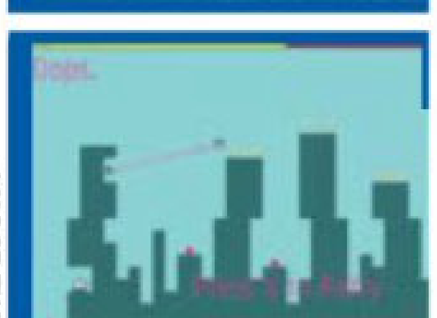
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Game Freak
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SONIC BOOM: RISE OF LYRIC



WORSE THAN



N++

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TRUNK POWER: How many other games can you list off the top of your head that allow you to play as a bandana-wearing elephant? Our guess is: absolutely zero.

VERDICT

A NICE CONCEPT LET DOWN BY PREDICTABLE DESIGN

6 — gamesTMmag scored **6** for Tembo The Badass Elephant

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE





Right: Short, silent storyboard frames elaborate the loose narrative between keys levels. They're quite brilliantly drawn, up there with the best animation available on children's TV.

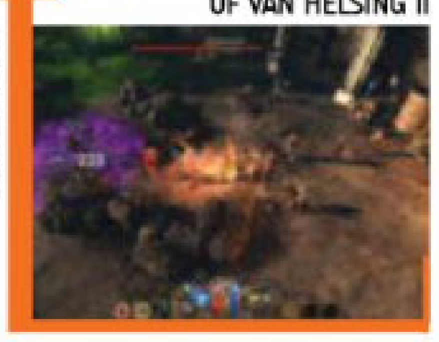
DEMON HUNTING WITH A DIFFERENT NAME

Victor Vran

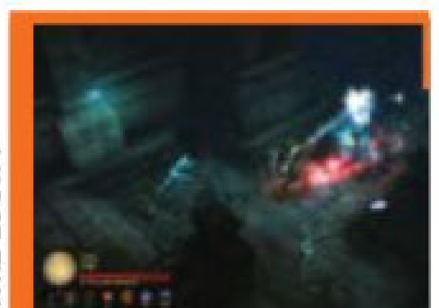
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Bulgaria
PUBLISHER: EuroVideo Medien
DEVELOPER: Haemimont Games
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz Dual Core CPU, 512MB GPU, 4GB RAM, 4GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES OF VAN HELSING II



WORSE THAN



DIABLO III

As we already know, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. And – as we already know – the games industry is full of flatterers. In the case of *Victor Vran* it feels a little mean calling it a copycat; as a click-heavy, loot-driven action RPG it's unavoidably part of a genre more commonly described as 'Diablo clones'. But for all intents and purposes, that is what Haemimont's latest is, taking the improvements and innovations of Blizzard's *Diablo III* and adding its own twist – albeit a twist that doesn't do nearly enough to get *Victor Vran* to tumble out of the behemoth shadow that it's trying to mimic.

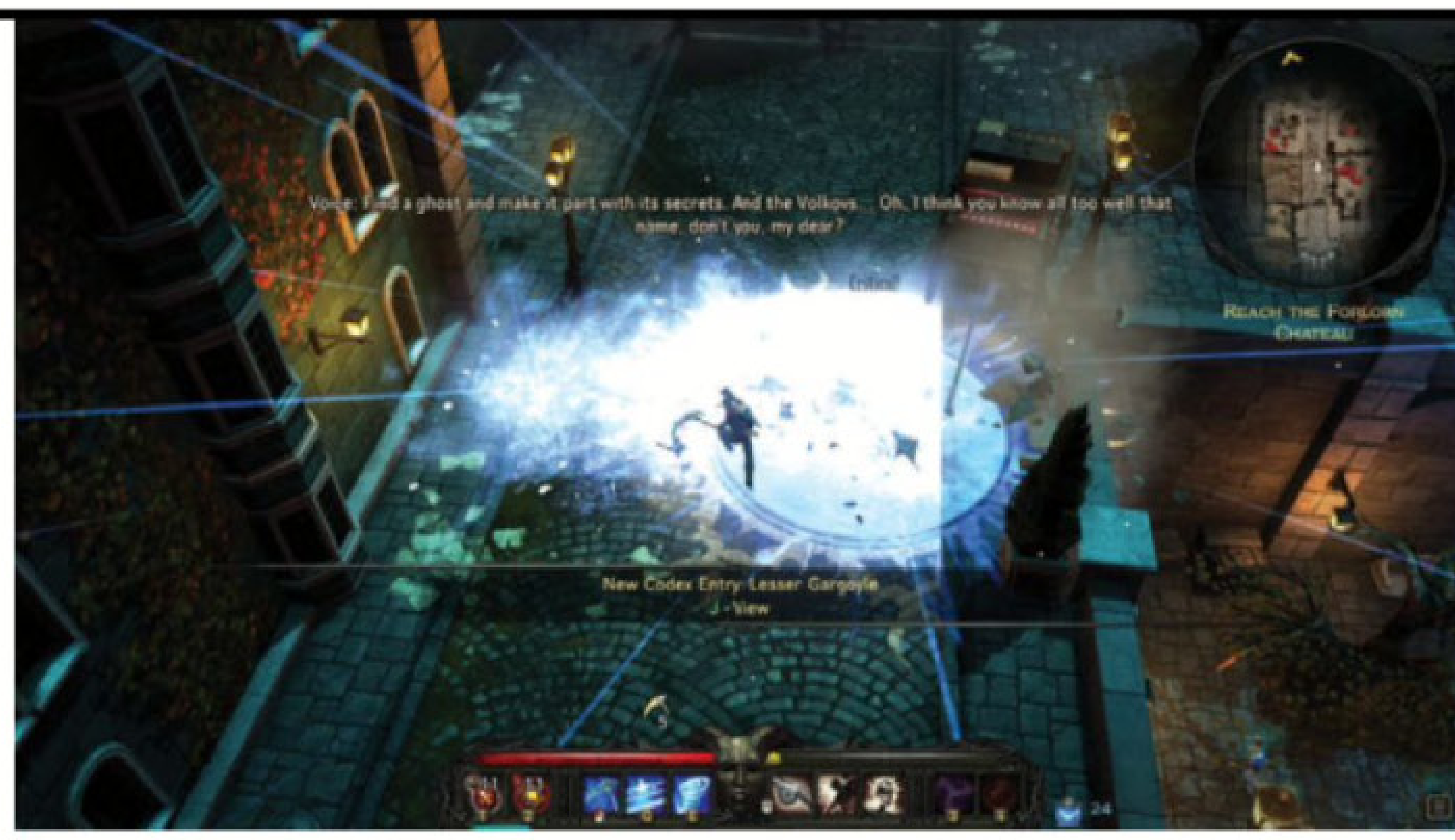
There are some differences worth noting, though. For one, you don't select a class from the start. Instead, your abilities are directly tied to the weapon, demon powers and passive tarot cards that you equip. This alone mixes up the central gameplay, with each class of weapon coming with two abilities and the option to equip two different weapons at any one time. This means that as the loot keeps coming you'll change your playstyle as often as your most powerful weapon. There's a great deal of customisation and, again, it's all driven by equippable randomised loot drops, and makes for an ever-changing game. This ties into the very core compulsion of the genre itself, and gives players a reason to replay areas on harder difficulties.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHEN HELL FREEZES: Asking a *Diablo* clone to avoid similarities to Blizzard's standout franchise is a bit much, but if it didn't feel *too* familiar then *Victor Vran* would have been a more significant release.

Sadly, that's where the randomised elements end. Rather than the procedurally generated dungeons of *Diablo*, *Victor Vran* features hand-designed maps and specifically placed enemies. Though it helps tell its story and guide the player's exploration, it affects the game's longevity. This is doubly so for the lack of variety in enemy types, with new beasts and monsters being introduced too slowly and the roster rotated far too rarely. You'll find yourself smashing through the same spiders and skeletons at the end that you encountered at the start of the game, just with minor changes in colour palette, abilities and strength. These problems are rectified a little by its challenge system, where each area has five optional tasks that you can take on, increasing in difficulty as you progress through the game. It's enough to get you playing in a very particular way, or even returning at a later date to tick off those that were initially just too tough. Again, none of this really does much to separate it from its obvious reference points; even much of the visual design – from its UI to flourishes such as the way gold erupts from the ground after downing tougher enemies – harkens back to Blizzard's efforts with *Diablo III*. Unoriginal might be the best way of describing *Victor Vran*, but as far as *Diablo* clones go, there are much worse to lose your time to.



Above: Each new area and chapter is tied together with a flimsy story. It just lacks the necessary quality that is needed if players are to pay it any heed over the compulsion to just hack and slash through everything.

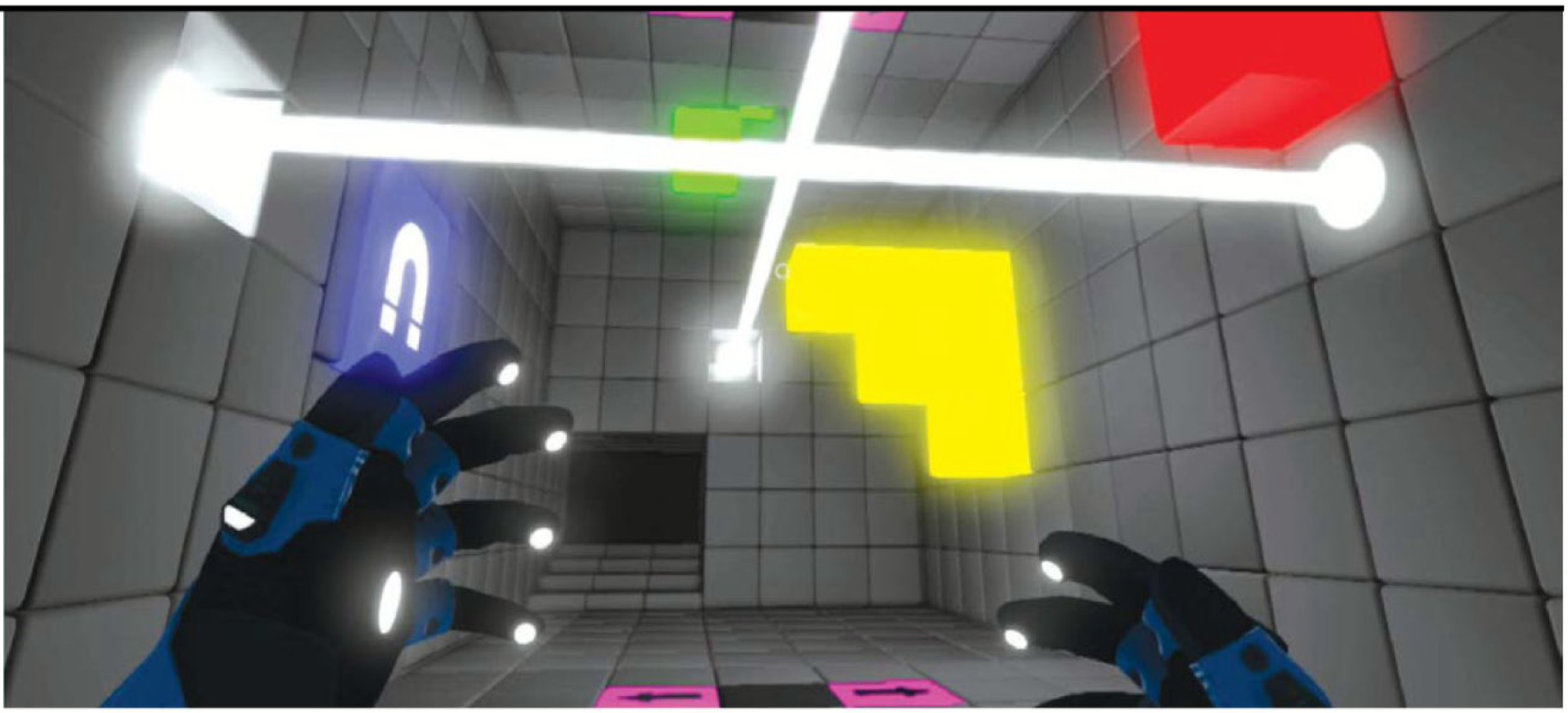




VERDICT

UNSURPRISINGLY DERIVATIVE, SURPRISINGLY COMPELLING

gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Victor Vran
6
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Interestingly, nobody at Toxic Games is a programmer or coder by trade. *Q.U.B.E* was completed using nothing but outsourced talent, and Toxic's three founder members never once worked directly on the game's code.

ATTACK THE BLOCK

Q.U.B.E: Director's Cut

It's disconcerting when puzzle games burden themselves with wholly redundant narrative components, but in comparison to the majority of its genre stablemates, *Q.U.B.E*'s opening hour is a storytelling masterclass. Instead of bombarding players with superfluous plot, you're told about your character's life and situation for one entirely perfect reason: to stop you from losing your marbles in the heartless, disorientating depths of deep space.

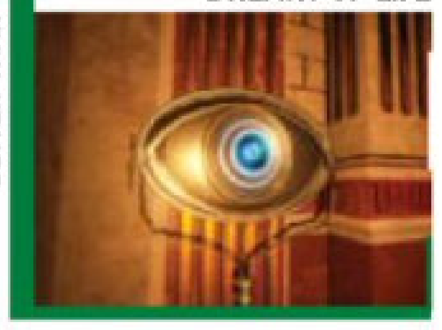
It's very disappointing to note that *Q.U.B.E*'s narrative subsequently takes a sharp turn towards the (profoundly contrived) realms of conspiracy and paranoia, but first impressions that forceful don't fade easily. Following a somewhat hushed reception on PC and Mac back in 2012, this new *Director's Cut* of Toxic Games' first-person puzzler arrives with polished visuals and new time-based challenges, and it remains a messy but thoroughly gripping adventure.

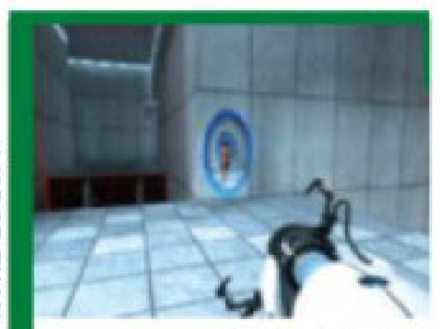
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, PS4, PS3, Wii U
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Toxic Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

PNEUMA: BREATH OF LIFE





WORSE THAN

PORTAL

But it is dizzyingly unfocused at times. The gratifying logic puzzles of the first half soon give way to finicky physics problems that exclusively demand periods of ceaseless and tedious trial and error. The unnecessarily brutal auto-save system forces you to retry completed sections if you're unfortunate enough to need a break, and ignoring the storyline isn't easy when sizeable sections of the world have been structured expressly to give you enough time to soak it all in.

But, if ripping off *Portal* is to be regarded as a sin, you'll finish *Q.U.B.E* wishing that more developers would commit it. The stark visuals and haunting musical score may be pure Valve, but then so is the persuasive and refined sense of control. *Q.U.B.E*'s difficulty tier may be far more erratic than *Portal*'s was, but the cocksure sense of pace is easily on a par. And, while *Q.U.B.E* may not be a work of stringent quality control, its difficult to begrudge something with such a ceaselessly and disarmingly forthright approach.

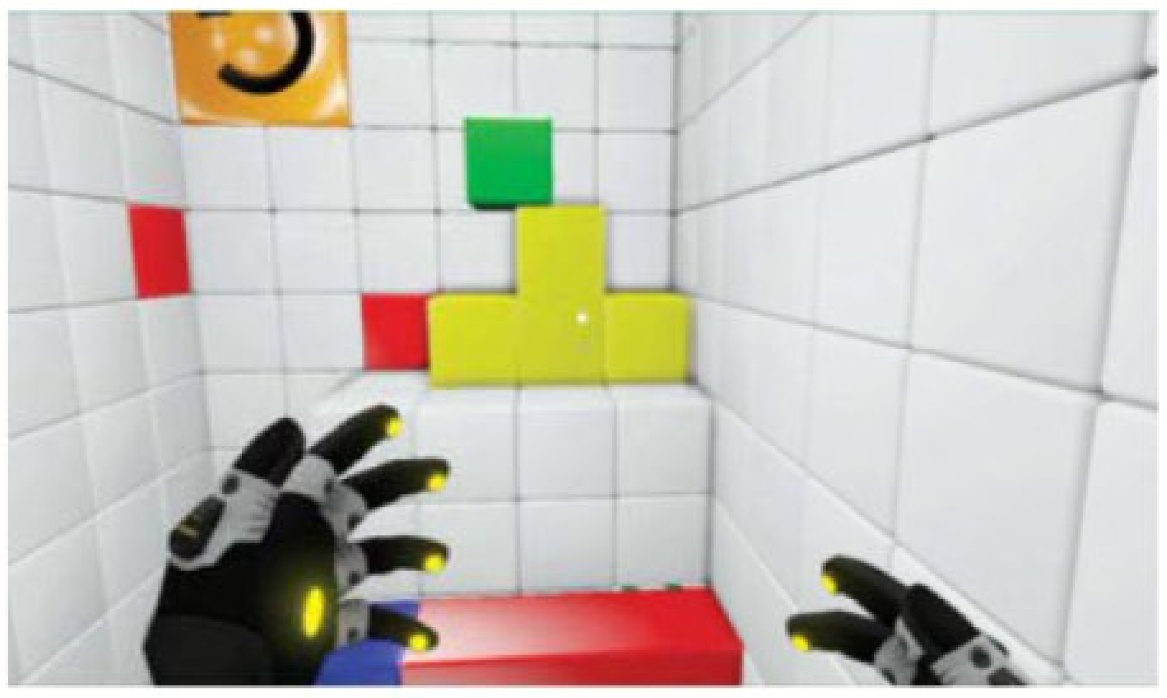
And it never panders, despite the fact that the fundamentals of play change all the time. You coast from block puzzles to switch puzzles, from perspective problems to timing-based conundrums, yet nothing is ever explained to you: your understanding is all part of the puzzle. You're just some petrified goof in a sealed room with a pair of magic gloves and a confounding puzzle to solve, and most players will be deeply invigorated by that or instantaneously compelled to consult a youthful YouTube oracle. Whichever path you choose, it's difficult to deny that Toxic Games has created something that is both durable and genuinely compelling.

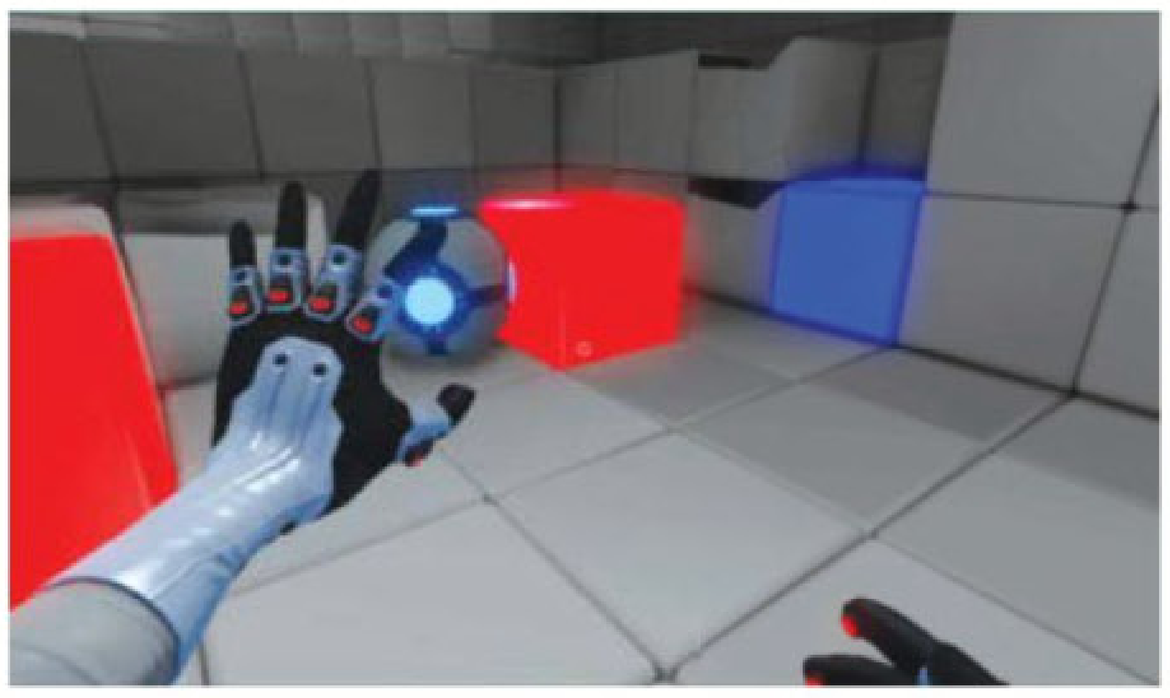
Smart, sketchy but pacy, *Q.U.B.E: Director's Cut* is more than worth the price of admission, regardless of format.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PHYSICS: When *Q.U.B.E* dips its toes in physics-based puzzling, the overall quality quickly plummets. The lack of improved, modified systems here is a bit of a shame.





VERDICT

NO MASTERPIECE, BUT CAPTIVATING

7

gamesTMmag scored **7** for
Q.U.B.E: Director's Cut
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

A GOOD SEQUEL SPOILED BY STRUCTURE

Angry Birds 2

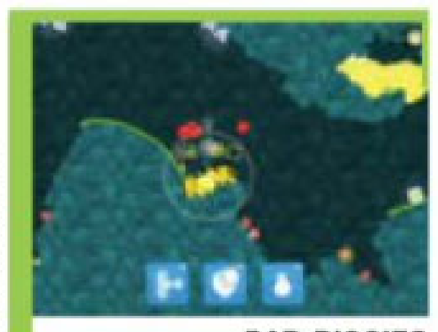
DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rovio Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CUT THE ROPE





BAD PIGGIES

WORSE THAN

After 12 spin-off games capitalising on the wildly successful original, Rovio has now finally brought out *Angry Birds 2.* The mechanics of the game are exactly the same. You pull the catapult back and launch your bird at the structures housing the green pigs that have stolen the birds' eggs. Destroy the structure, kill the pigs and move on. However, there are some changes that make this a little more engaging than the original.

Firstly, each level now has more than one stage, so you need to make sure you've held onto enough birds to finish the level. This adds an extra level of strategy to the gameplay that makes you think harder about which bird you select for the job, as you can now choose which bird you send out. Another new addition is the Arena. This is an endless challenge where you try and get past as many stages as possible to earn feathers for a bird, which is essentially levelling up, to rise up the league table.

The big negative is the in-app purchases. You no longer have to pay for the game, but Rovio has added microtransactions. You have five lives and each failed attempt at a level costs you a life, cutting down heavily on how long you can play for. This resets after half an hour but you *can* pay to get new lives. Not ideal.

It basically has everything we enjoyed about the original but with more involving gameplay. It's surprisingly enjoyable to have to think about more than just the angle of your throw and the Arena adds an extra competitive spice to what is still an easy, yet often frustrating, game. We just wish in-app purchases didn't add further frustration.

VERDICT

FLINGING FUN REMAINS, IN-APP PURCHASES ANNOY

gamesTMmag scored **6** for Angry Birds 2

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Below: Little has changed in terms of the ultimate aim of the game, but Rovio has increased the engagement level and made the animations much better.



A FUN SPIN ON CLASSIC MECHANICS

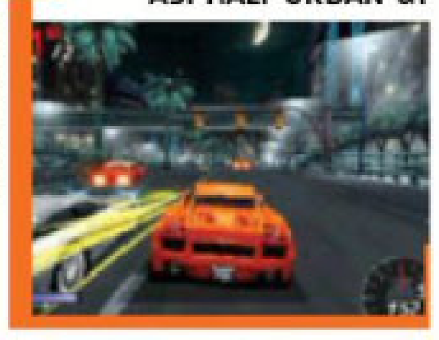
Absolute Drift

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac/Linux
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Funselektor Labs
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1GB RAM, 500MB HDD space, Pentium 4 1.8GHz processor

BETTER THAN

ASPHALT URBAN GT





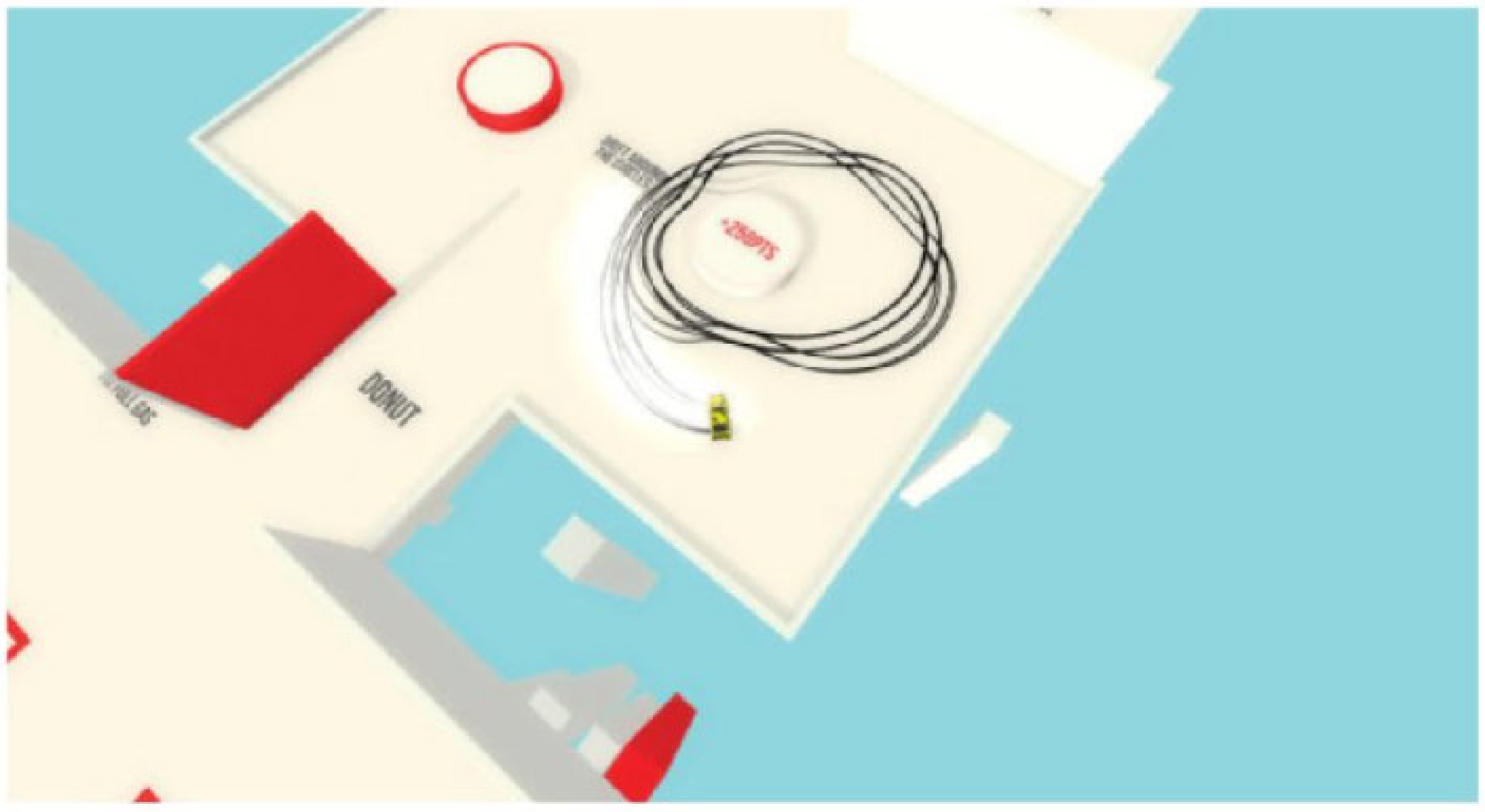
COLIN MCRAE: DIRT 2

WORSE THAN

***Absolute Drift* stands out from the plethora of driving games by being an intriguing mix of drifting game and puzzler.** Controls are extremely straightforward but the drifting itself is incredibly tricky to master. The slightest excess on the accelerator can send you into a wild spin that takes a fair while to get out of. Luckily, you can alter the sensitivity.

The main aim is to progress through each world by completing tasks, like drifting through a gap or performing doughnuts around an obstacle. Occasionally it descends into button-mashing, but on the whole you need to be precise. Each new world's tasks increase a little in difficulty and you have to complete them all before being able to move onto the next stage. A few take a little working out, but generally it relies on the dexterity of your fingers.

The graphics are very simple, with a direct top-down view over the car and the obstacles, which does lead to the occasional crash as you're sometimes unsure if an obstacle is solid or not. Overall, this is an entertaining game without truly hitting any major heights. It strikes a good balance between challenging and achievable, with the competitive element coming via the leaderboards. While boredom can set in as you perform the same handful of actions time and time again, there is just enough variety to keep you entertained.



Above: Performing a doughnut around an obstacle racks up the points. Plus it's really good fun when you finally nail that perfect drift.



VERDICT

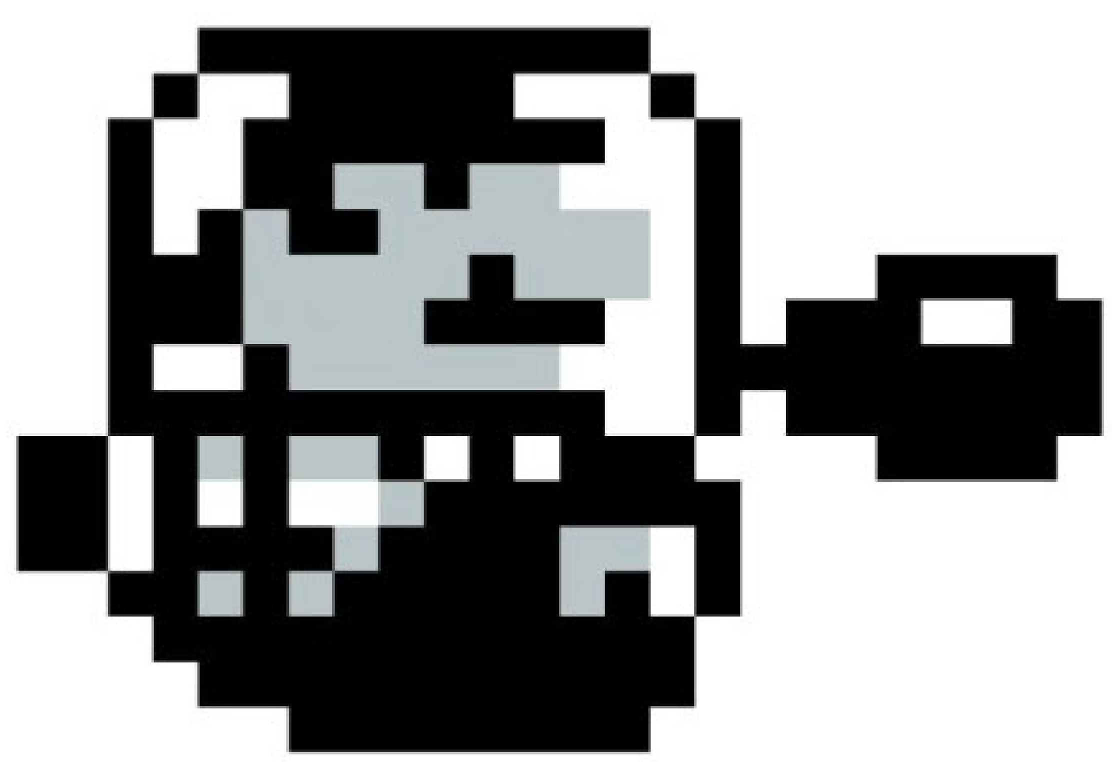
NOT A THRILL RIDE BUT CHALLENGING AND FUN


gamesTMmag scored **5** for Absolute Drift

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

“We never had a real Nintendo console, just one of those brick Game Boys that my dad bought us – we’d end up fighting over it in the back of the car”

DAVID RANYARD, STUDIO HEAD, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT (LONDON)





WHY I ♥…

SUPER MARIO LAND

DAVID RANYARD, STUDIO HEAD, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT (LONDON)

“*The* Mario *game I've played more than any other is the one that was released [as a launch game] on the original Game Boy. [Hums the intro music]. You know, I could just do that all day! [laughs] We never had a real Nintendo console, just one of those brick Game Boys that my dad bought us – we'd end up fighting over it in the back of the car. I used to travel a lot as a kid, so I played a lot of that game! But saying that, I've played a lot of* Mario Kart, *too, that was a favourite – I think it's so well crafted, considering how lightly it's crafted, yet it's got this incredible depth to it, too. The replayability of it is phenomenal – to the point where, until I was more involved in games, I never even knew that was what was happening. You can't identify what it's doing to you until you think about it in more detail! So I liked* Mario Kart *a lot, but my overall favourite would have to be the old black-and-white* Super Mario Land *on the Game Boy.*”

RETRO

NO.165



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RETRO GUIDE TO

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

The console that helped the industry heal – we celebrate the best of the NES



BEHIND THE SCENES

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We explore the making of this groundbreaking third-person shooter experience



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The former Sega Of America CEO chats to us about his days with the Japanese publisher



GAME CHANGERS

122 **SUPER MARIO KART**

The premier karting experience spawned plenty of imitators, but what made it such a success?

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**



THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

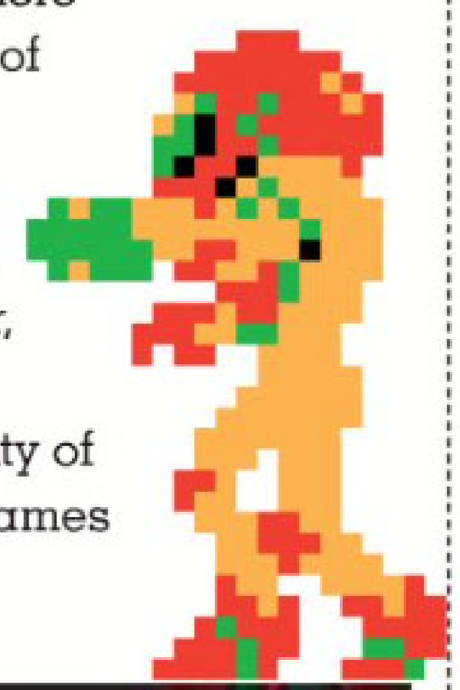
NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

games™ celebrates the console that revitalised a stagnating American games industry and introduced gamers to some of gaming's most-loved franchises

IT'S EASY TO forget just how important Nintendo's 8-bit console was, because it never really made the same impact in Europe as it did in the rest of the world. Europe wasn't affected by the great videogame crash that ruptured the US game's industry, so the 8-bit home computers were able to put in a strong showing. Even when the NES did show up in the UK (some three years after the original Japanese release where it was known as the Famicom), it trailed behind Sega's own 8-bit console, the Master System.

And yet even if your only interaction with a NES console was on the shelves of Boots or WHSmith, it was obvious that this was a console to keep an eye on. It made its 8-bit computer based peers look positively primitive in comparison (although those same home systems still managed to excel in certain genres), delivering a professionalism and layer of polish that systems like the Spectrum couldn't hope to match.

The addition of R.O.B. and the Zapper gun helped the system stealthily slide into toy shops in the US, while excellent arcade ports of the likes of *Donkey Kong*, *Popeye* and *Dig Dug* made other consoles of the time look relatively tired. With Super *Mario* celebrating its 30th anniversary, it felt like the perfect time to take a closer look at the console where Mario had some of his most popular and bestselling adventures – but, as you'll discover, the modest 8-bit console had plenty of other essential games on it as well.

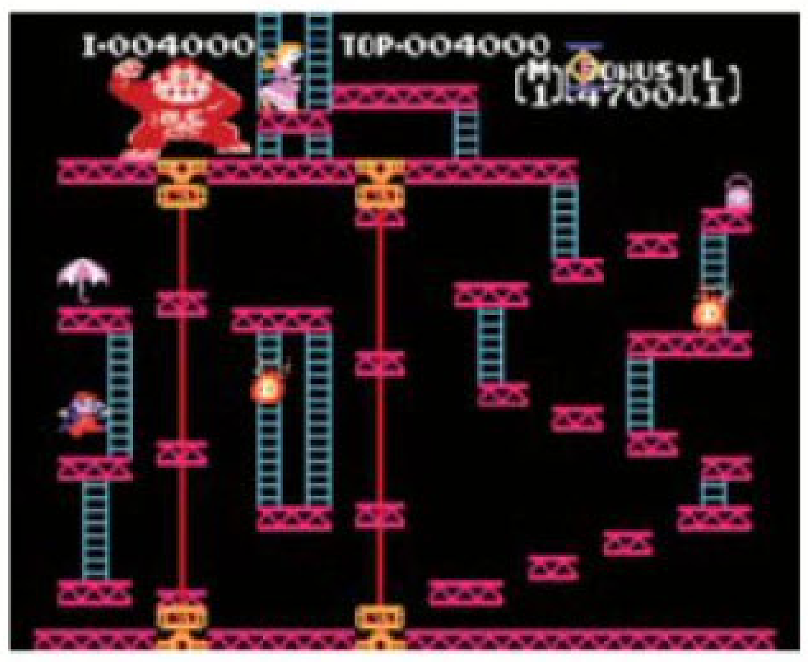




DUCK HUNT 1984

NINTENDO R&D1

Duck Hunt was based on an early Nintendo electronic game called *Beam Gun: Duck Hunt*. The NES version is a hell of a lot of fun, and the definitive game for the NES's Zapper gun. There aren't many gameplay modes, but the erratic flight of the ducks presents a more-than-worthy challenge.





DONKEY KONG 1983

NINTENDO

Nintendo's Famicom only launched with a handful of games, but this was arguably the best one. Sure, it wasn't arcade perfect (one level is actually missing), but it does capture the brilliance of Nintendo's coin-op. It also proved that Nintendo's new console wasn't to be sniffed at in the power stakes either, thanks to impressive sprite design that matched the arcade originals.

EXCITEBIKE 1982

NINTENDO R&D1

There's a lot to love about *Excitebike*. The graphics are wonderful with cute sprite design, the levels are nice and challenging, while the AI is surprisingly ferocious. It's the level editor that really saves *Excitebike* however, allowing you to create all sorts of devious courses for your friends to race upon. It's received several sequels over the years, with the last being *Excitebike: World Rally* in 2010.





BALLOON FIGHT 1985

NINTENDO R&D1

Before Satoru Iwata ran Nintendo he used to be a games developer. This is one of his earliest works, a fun take on *Joust* that sees a kid trying to burst the balloons of rival floating penguins before they manage to do the same to his own.

POPEYE 1983

NINTENDO R&D1

Another Famicom launch game and yet another that has stood the test of time. Playing as Popeye, you must collect items that Olive Oyl throws to you while avoiding rival Brutus. The gameplay is admittedly simple, but it's varied enough thanks to some fun level layouts. Although Popeye can punch things, he's unable to directly attack Brutus; instead the iconic sailor must find a can of spinach, and gain invincibility to send the big guy running. Fun and fast-paced.





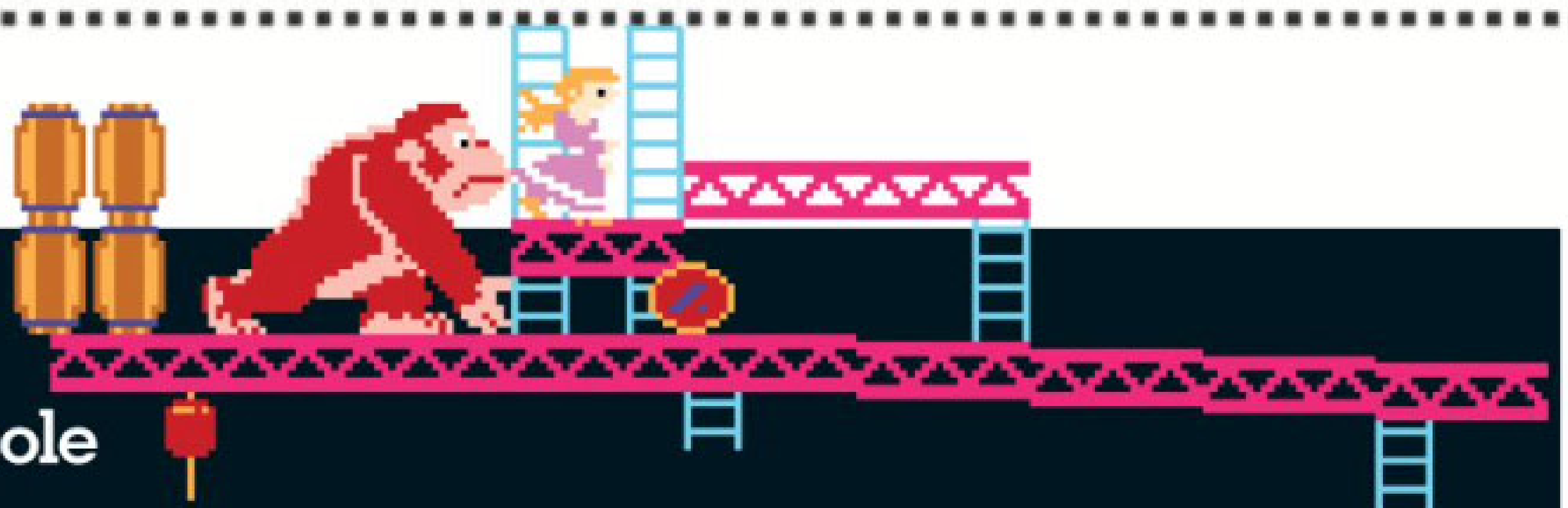
KUNG FU 1985

NINTENDO R&D1

Don't be fooled by the name, as this is effectively a port of the hit Irem coin-op *Kung Fu Master*. Taking control of Keiji Thomas, you must negotiate five increasingly tougher stages while searching for your girlfriend, Sylvia. Enemies attack from both sides of the screen en masse, meaning Thomas must constantly kick and punch his way to victory, while shaking off any foes that would comically grab onto him.







COLIN PORCH INTERVIEW

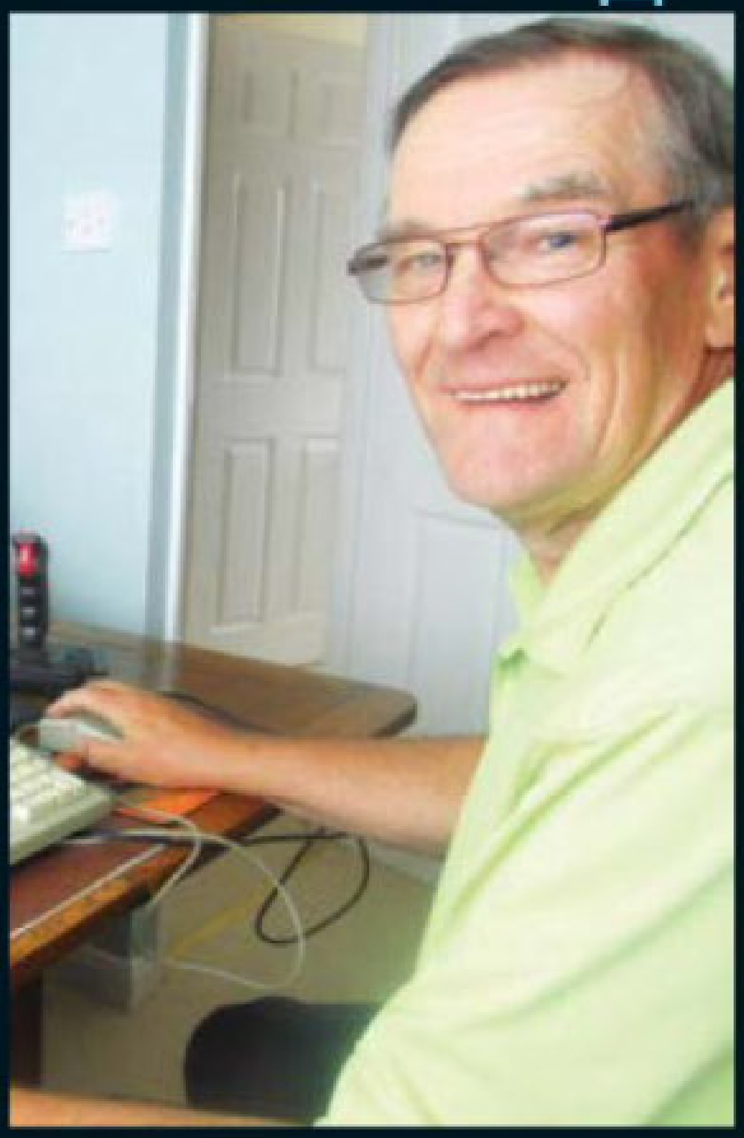
The ex Ocean staffer on Nintendo's 8-bit console

How did you get to work on the NES?
I was 'loaned' to Special FX in Liverpool from Ocean, because I was a fairly well established 6502 programmer for the C64, and the NES used the same processor (well, very similar, anyway). I only ever worked on one game there, which was called *Caveman Games*. It tried to create how the prehistoric Olympic Games might have looked.

What was the NES like to program for?
As I remember, it was a right pain in the neck to program. It had a lot of registers, which had dual purpose. They would be doing one thing during part of its cycle and something else during another part. If you tried to process one use while it was actually performing the other, it simply crashed!

Was it a big step up to the home system?
I wouldn't say it was a step up compared to the C64, say. The dual-purpose registers kept costs down, but they made the programmer's job a lot harder. There were a lot of 'sprites' available, but they were very small (8 x 8 pixels?), so you had to manipulate quite a lot at once to create a moving character.

What's the best NES game you've played?
I'm afraid that I never played any other NES games. The consoles we were working with had been specially adapted as development machines, with cables sprouting out everywhere. You could not plug other cartridges into them.

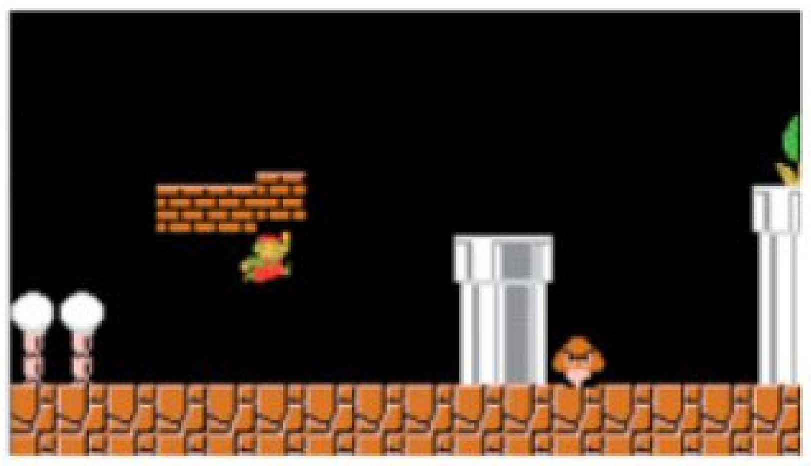


SUPER MARIO BROS 1985

NINTENDO R&D4

This gem from Shigeru Miyamoto became one of the most successful games of all time, selling over 40 million units. It helped revolutionise the scrolling platformer, turned Mario into a bona fide star and highlighted the gulf that was beginning to grow between 8-bit computers and consoles. It's perhaps one of the most important NES games of all time and still plays superbly today.





METROID 1986

NINTENDO R&D1

Like *Zelda*, *Metroid* began as a Famicom Disk System game, before receiving a standard cartridge release for its western debut. It's beautifully designed, with the world slowly opening up as you acquire new weapons and delve deeper and deeper into the planet Zebes. It's also amazingly atmospheric thanks to some stunning sound design.







THE LEGEND OF ZELDA 1986

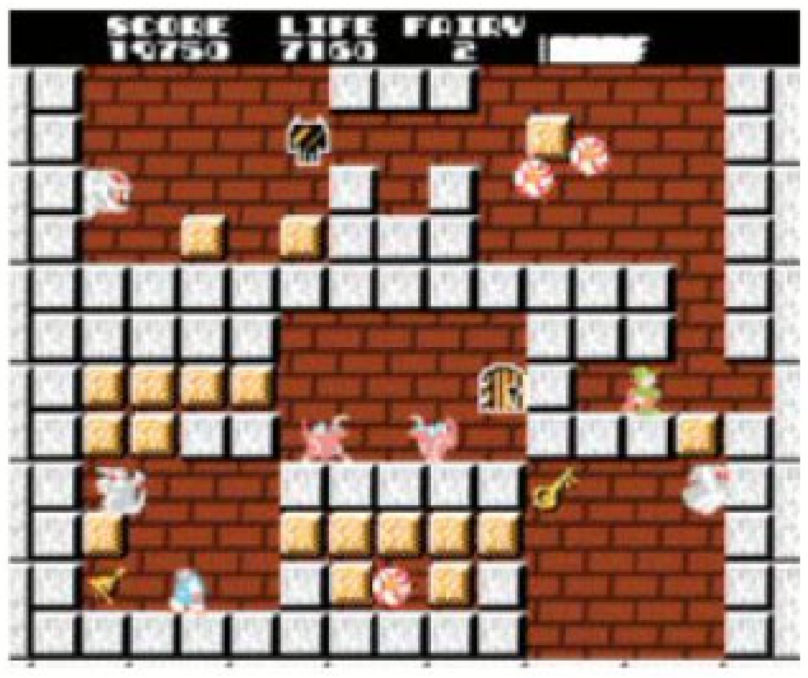
NINTENDO R&D4

Another gem from Miyamoto and one that spawned a massive franchise. Miyamoto's love of exploring the unknown resulted in a charming adventure that slowly reveals its secrets as you gain additional weapons and items. It was the first NES cartridge to receive an internal battery due to Nintendo not launching its disk system add-on overseas.

SOLOMON'S KEY 1986

TECMO

This enchanting puzzle/platformer is another excellent arcade conversion, this time by Tecmo. Playing a wizard, you must reach the level's exit by avoiding enemies and manipulating blocks, hopefully trapping troublesome foes in the process. It's not the easiest of games, but the clever level design keeps pulling you back.



"SUPER MARIO BROS (1985) TURNED MARIO INTO A BONA FIDE STAR"





ZANAC 1986

COMPILE

This excellent blaster isn't the prettiest of games, but it does make up for it in sheer excitement. Created by shoot-'em-up experts Compile, it plays at an astonishingly fast pace and boasts a unique AI system that evolves to suit those playing it, meaning that anyone will be challenged regardless of skill. Elements such as its clever weapon system (there are eight distinctive power-ups for you to choose from) would later influence Compile's *Aleste* series.



KID ICARUS 1986

NINTENDO R&D1

■ This odd effort combines standard platforming with RPG elements. Protagonist Pit makes his way through three distinct game worlds (the underworld, over world and sky world) while battling monsters and extremely tough bosses. It's one of Nintendo's weakest franchises, the last of two sequels appearing on 3DS in 2012.

SUPER MARIO BROS 2 1987

NINTENDO R&D4

■ Nintendo's *Super Mario* sequel was deemed too hardcore for soft westerners, so a Japanese game, *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic*, was re-skinned with a *Mario* theme. While it plays completely different to its predecessor, the different strength characters and clever stage design make it worthy of the *Super Mario Bros* name. Interestingly, it didn't arrive in the west until 1988.





LIFE FORCE 1987

KONAMI

■ While *Gradius* would be a more obvious choice, *Life Force* is a better game. It's a port of *Salamander*, which was modified for American arcades and called *Life Force*. The biggest change to the *Salamander* coin-op is that NES *Life Force* features the power-up system first used in *Gradius*, which adds a level of strategy missing from the arcade coin-op. It re-jigs levels and bosses, but the multiple endings are only in the Japanese original.

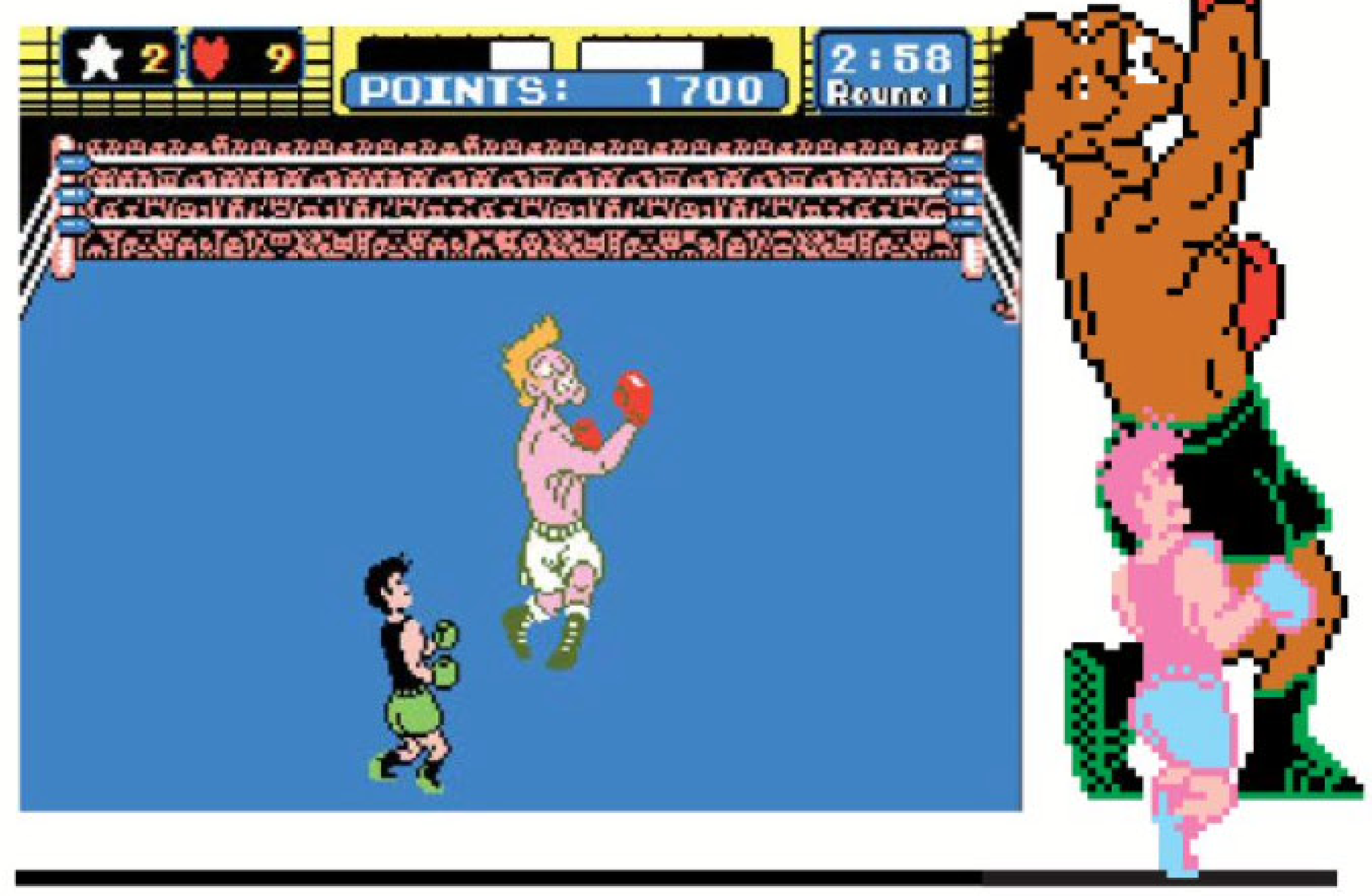




MIKE TYSON'S PUNCHOUT!! 1987

NINTENDO R&D3

■ It started as an arcade game, but was on the NES where Nintendo's boxing game found its home. *Punchout!!* is as much a game of reaction as action, with players having to read the tells of the weird and wacky opponents that Little Mac faces on his way to becoming heavyweight champ. While many versions of the game result in a final battle with Mike Tyson, he was replaced with Mr. Dream, when he lost his fight to James 'Buster' Douglas.



FINAL FANTASY 1987

SQUARESOFT



■ *Final Fantasy* was going to be Squaresoft's last game. Instead, it became a stellar success, enchanting gamers the world over and leading to one of gaming's biggest franchises. While gameplay is conventional, the deep combat system, entertaining storyline and memorable characters give it identity. It's been remade since.

R.C. PRO-AM 1988

RARE

■ The NES didn't really have too many decent racers, but it did have this one. It's a mighty fine effort from Rare, featuring smart track design and 24 progressively challenging courses. Although it's a racer at heart, there are a few weapons to have fun with too.





CONTRA 1988

KONAMI

■ Konami's coin-op was a huge success on the NES where many gamers revelled in its two-player cooperative action. While it's stupidly tough at times, Konami overhauled many aspects of it to suit the home console market, by altering levels and making power-ups more common. It's also one of many Konami NES games that featured its famous 'Konami Code'.





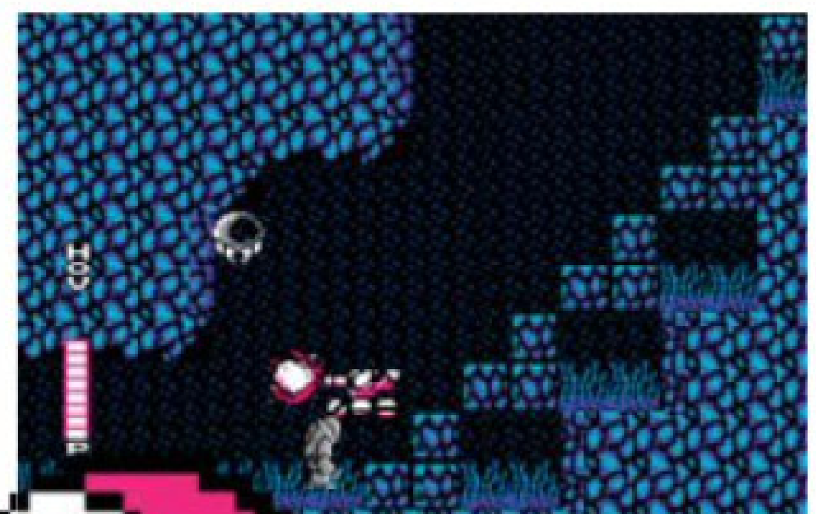
DRAGON QUEST III: THE SEEDS OF SALVATION 1988

CHUNSOFT

■ The third game in the series, but chronologically the first. It's important for introducing mechanics like a persistent game world that features day and night cycles, and an all-new, class-changing system that would appear in many later games. It's called *Dragon Warrior III* in the States.

BLASTER MASTER 1988

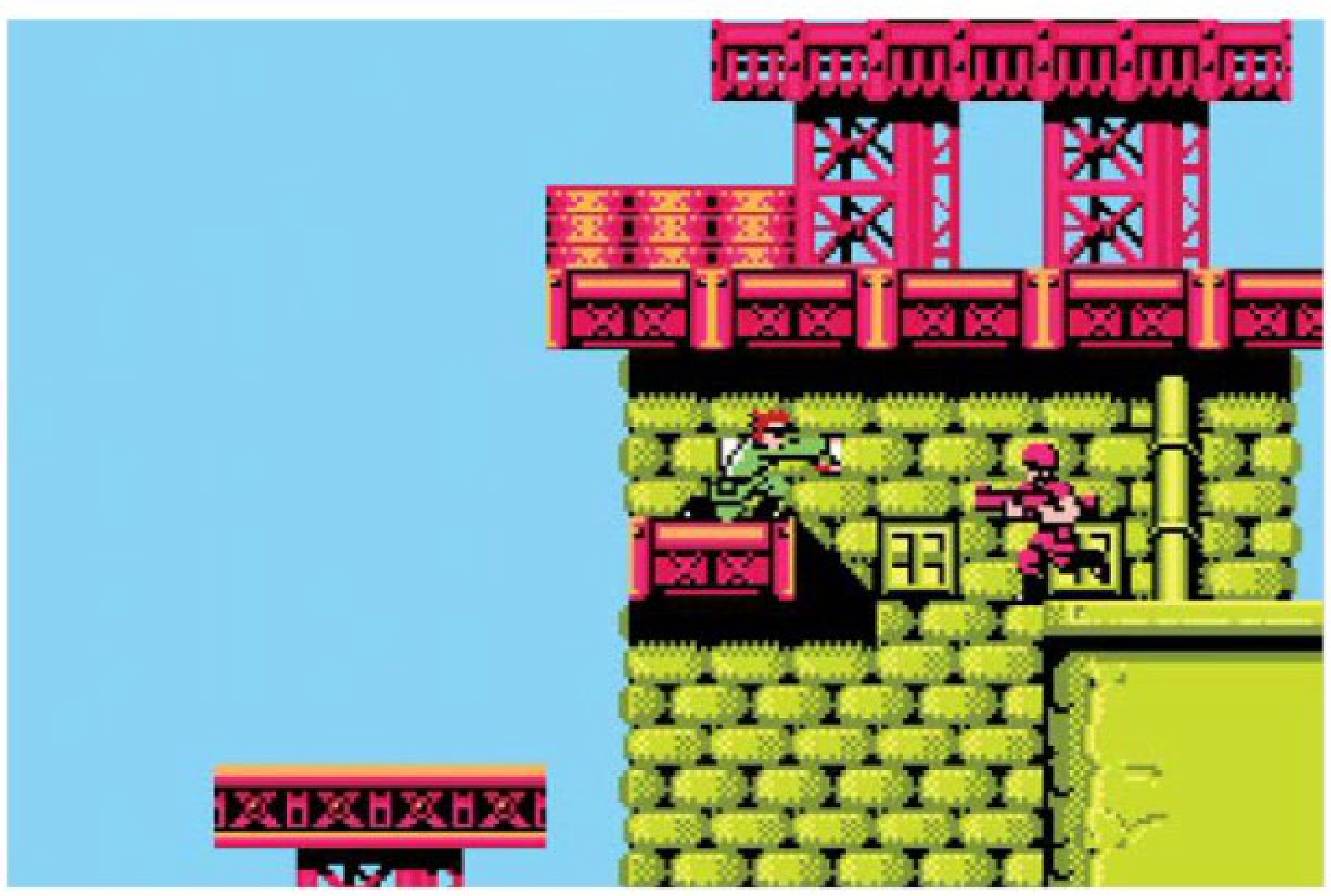
SUNSOFT



■ There's a lot to enjoy about Sunsoft's game. It straddles genres and viewpoints, alternating between side-on and top-down gameplay. Most levels take place in a versatile, bouncy tank, but it's also possible to leave it in order to reach the many smaller complexes. A truly satisfying blaster.



> "BLASTER MASTER STRADDLES GENRES AND VIEWPOINTS"



BIONIC COMMANDO 1988

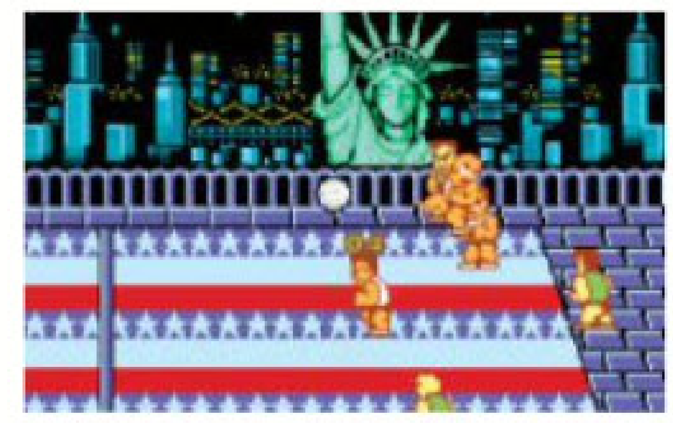
CAPCOM

■ NES *Bionic Commando* is not the same game as the coin-op, although it does share similarities, so your character can't jump and must rely on his bionic arms to swing through stages. Capcom's game was originally known as *Hitler's Revival: Top Secret in Japan*, but most Nazi references were removed for Europe. The final boss is still Hitler, however his name has been changed to 'Master-D'.

SUPER DODGE BALL 1988

TECHNOS

■ A fun, but loose adaptation of a 1987 coin-op that is also based on Technos' popular *Kunio-kun* series. The single-player mode is surprisingly substantial, while gameplay mechanics are deceptively deep, offering some relatively complex movesets to master. All the *Kunio-kun* references were removed from the western releases, while a four-player option in one of its modes was removed.





STE PICKFORD INTERVIEW

The Zippo Games co-founder talks NES





What was the NES like to work with compared to other systems?

It was better and worse. We came to the NES straight from 16-bit development (Amiga and ST), and initially it felt like a significant step backwards. The machine seemed very primitive – slow processor, low-res screen, few colours, little RAM and so on. We thought it was going to be awful to develop for. Then, once we got started, we realised it was a great little machine. It had (just about) the power required to do what it needed to do. You could scroll the whole screen, move lots of sprites around, and run a little game logic, all in 60fps relatively easily

What was the best benefit of working with the NES?

It was a great machine to work on, because you really were free to focus on making a good game, rather than simply trying to squeeze enough power out of the machine to scroll the screen or move enough sprites. I think that most of our pre-NES effort was focused on the technical challenge of simply getting a game to run well, and only from the NES days onwards were we actually able to properly focus on the gameplay primarily, rather than as a secondary bonus.

What's the best NES game you worked on and why?

I think *Solar Jetman* worked best, although I was only partly involved in that (Lyndon Brooke was lead artist, and I joined in half way through). It was the game that was the closest to being 'our' game, in that we designed it fully ourselves at our studio, rather than it being based on someone else's existing property – the Jetman character was added by Rare relatively late on (it was originally called Iota).

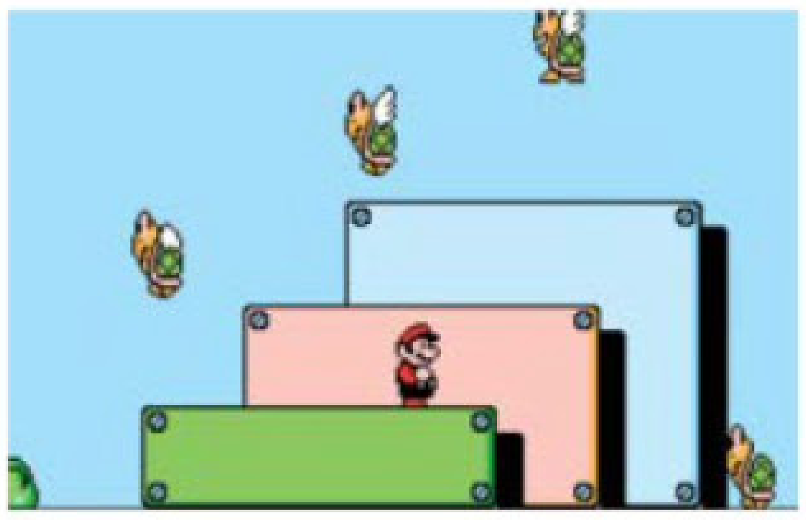
What's the best NES game you've played and why?

Mario 3. Still the best game ever made. It was so far ahead of anything else at the time, and had more invention and ideas than I've ever seen any single game.

SUPER MARIO BROS 3 1988

NINTENDO R&D4

■ This is the best platformer for NES and easily one of Mario's finest outings. It introduces several new suits for Mario to wear (including the Raccoon and Frog Suits), introduces a world map and the bonus-giving Toad Houses, and focuses on Bowser's children, the Koopalings. An astonishing game with magnificent level design and brilliant graphics.



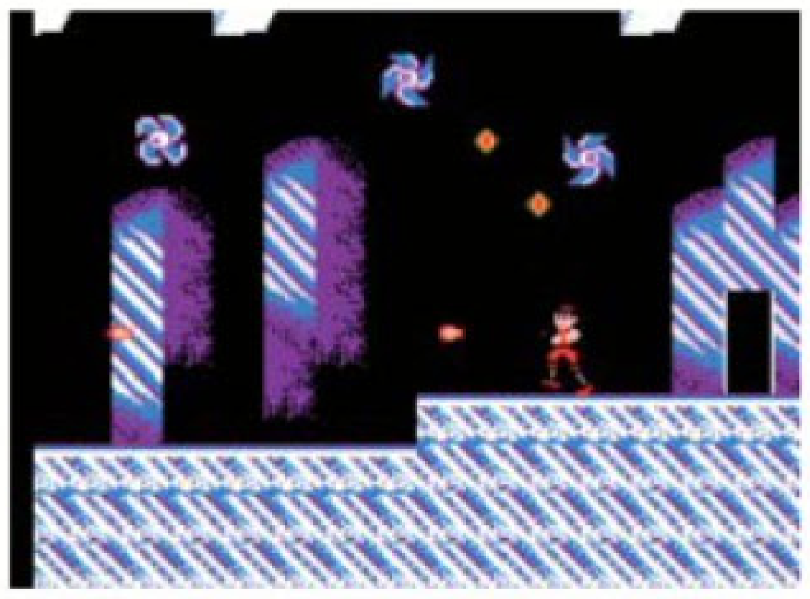




CLASH AT DEMONHEAD 1989

VIC TOKAI

■ This little known gem by Vic Tocai was the first NES game that Scott Pilgrim's Bryan Lee O'Malley ever played. It's a great introduction to the hobby thanks to its slick blend of adventuring and run-and-gun action, multiple routes (over 40, in fact) great music and challenging gameplay. Sadly, it never reached Europe.



MEGA MAN 2 1988

CAPCOM

■ Capcom released six *Mega Man* games for the NES, but his second adventure remains his best. The level design is top notch, while the eight bosses Mega Man faces are imaginative with challenging patterns. It's also better balanced than many of the other games, remaining tough, but never unfairly so. It's still *Mega Man*'s best-selling game.

RIVER CITY RANSOM 1989

TECHNOS

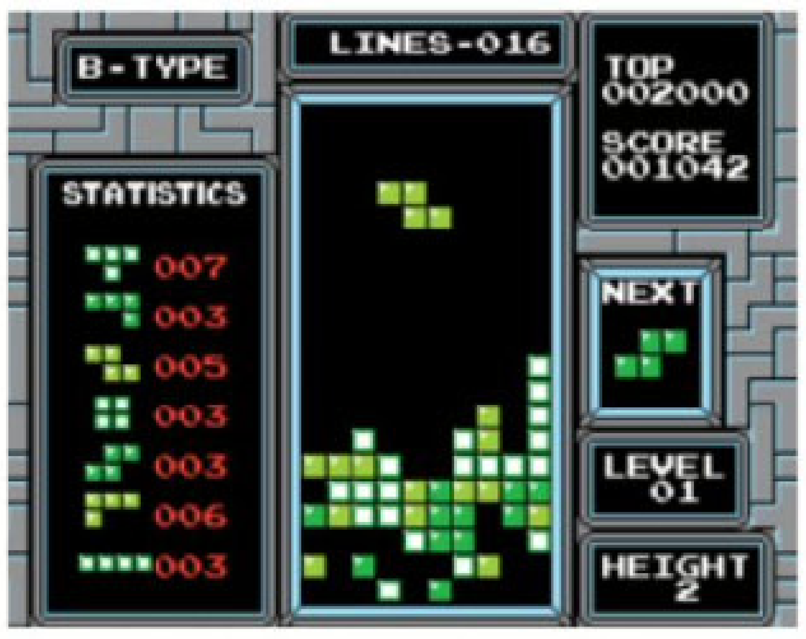
■ We were tempted to add *Double Dragon*, but this is soooo much better. Part of the *Kunio-Kun* series in Japan, *RCR* is an extravagant scrolling fighter with neat RPG mechanics woven into it. Massively overhauled graphically for western markets, it retains its impressive open world and the ability to enhance a character's skills by reading books.

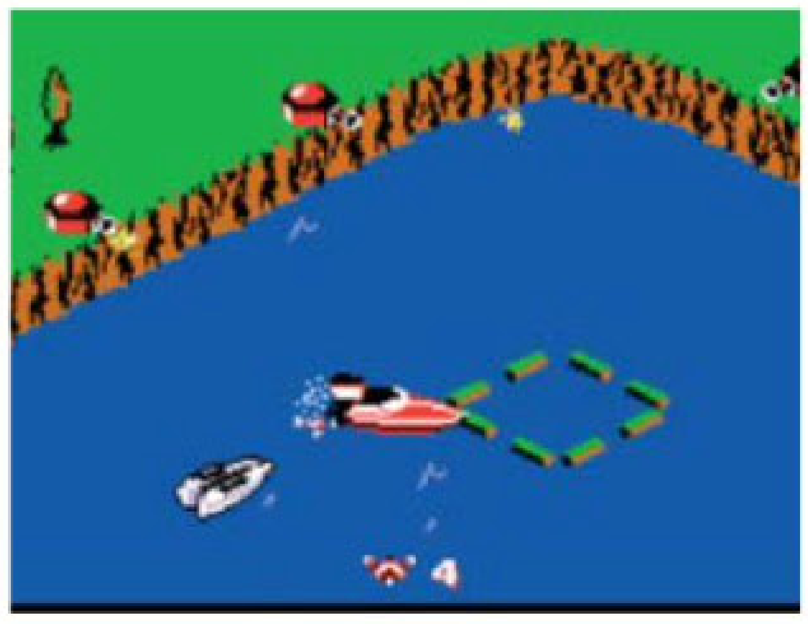


TETRIS 1989

NINTENDO

■ Atari Games released an unofficial version of *Tetris* under its Tengen label. A dispute with Nintendo saw the game recalled, making it something of an expensive rarity today. Nintendo's own version lacks the cool two-player mode and has a rather ugly colour palette, but retains the excellent gameplay. Quite possibly the finest puzzle game of all time.



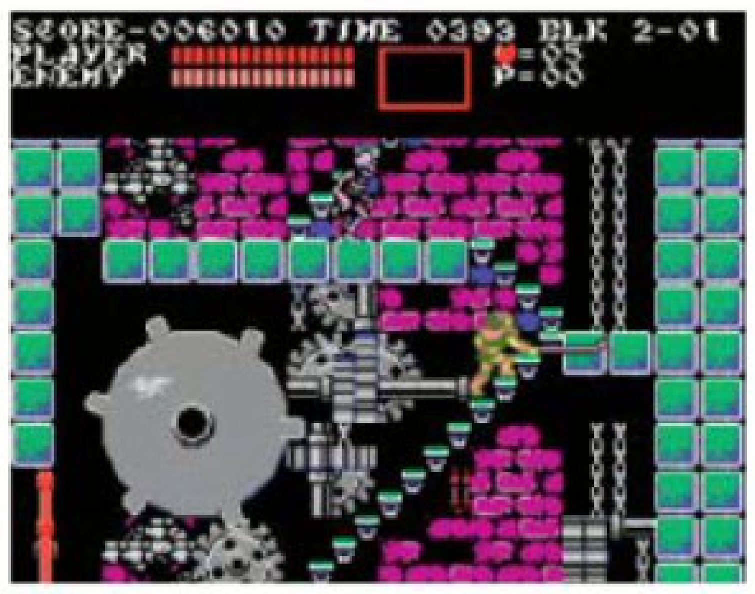


COBRA TRIANGLE 1989

RARE

■ This gem from Rare is a fantastically varied game. One minute you're detonating mines, the next you're fighting vicious sea monsters, rescuing swimmers and jumping over waterfalls. The 25 stages are full of variety, while the tight and responsive controls ensure your speedboat is nothing but a joy to use.





CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE 1989

KONAMI

■ The third *Castlevania* on NES is a ghoulish delight. It improves dramatically on its predecessors by delivering multiple routes for hero Trevor Belmont to navigate, assistant characters and greatly improved visuals. Like all the western *Castlevanias*, it's censored, but it doesn't affect the sublime and compelling gameplay.



A BOY AND HIS BLOB: TROUBLE ON BLOBOLONIA 1989

IMAGINEERING

■ From Activision co-founder David Crane this is very enjoyable. Feed jellybeans to your blob to transform him into useful objects and traverse treacherous terrain.

KICKLE CUBICLE 1990

IREM

■ This *Pengo*-styled puzzle game is a smart conversion of Irem's obscure coin-op. Protagonist Kickle uses his breath to turn enemies into ice, so he can shunt them around to reach his imprisoned friends.



SNAKE RATTLE 'N' ROLL 1990

RARE



■ After porting *Marble Madness* to the NES, Tim Stamper and Mark Betteridge made another isometric game for the 8-bit console. It is a surreal offering that revolves around eating 'nibbley pibbleys' to increase the length of your snake. Once it's big enough, you ring a bell to exit the level. Many of Rare's NES games featured its quirky British humour, but it's particularly prevalent here.

SHADOW OF THE NINJA 1990

NATSUME

■ True NES gamers play this gem and not any from Tecmo's *Ninja Gaiden* series. The difficulty level is better balanced in Natsume's game; it caters for co-op play; has plenty of diversity in its level design and features a solid range of power-ups. You can even choose between male and female ninjas.

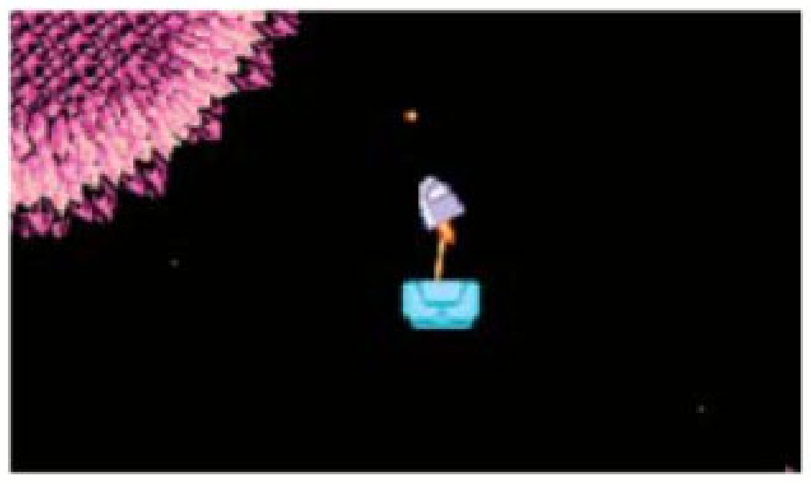


SOLAR JETMAN: HUNT FOR THE GOLDEN WARSHIP 1990

ZIPPO GAMES

■ Created by the Pickford brothers for Rare, it's the third *Jetpac* game. Unlike predecessors, it's inspired by *Thrust* and *Gravitar*, you navigate dangerous caverns to retrieve parts of the missing ship. It's challenging, but responsive controls and interesting locations make it a joy.

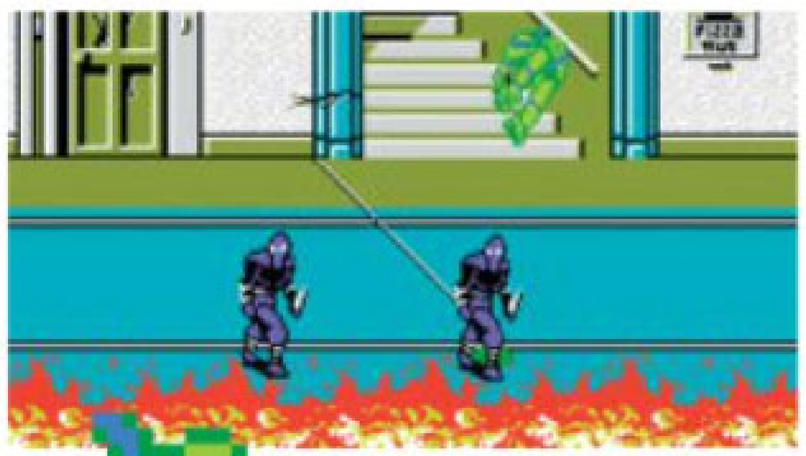




TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES II: THE ARCADE GAME 1990

KONAMI

■ While the first *Turtles* NES game impressed, it was far too difficult. Konami's adaptation of its popular coin-op was a more attractive proposition, even if it didn't cater for four players at once. It did feature two exclusive levels, new bosses and enemies, and extensive Pizza Hut promotion, as well as highly impressive visuals.





STARTROPICS 1990

NINTENDO IRD

■ *StarTropics* is a rather absorbing adventure game that pays off due to its chapter-based structure, large emphasis on exploration, and unique letter printed on parchment paper, which not only set up the game's plot, but was also used as an actual story device later on in the game. *StarTropics* is easily the thinking man's *Zelda*.



> "KLAX, BY ATARI GAMES, IS SO ADDICTIVE THAT THE BOX NEEDS TO COME WITH A WARNING"

KLAX 1990

ATARI GAMES

■ Yes we could have gone for a Nintendo exclusive puzzler, but *Klax* is sooo much better than the likes of *Wario Woods* or *Dr Mario*. Tiles come down a conveyer; catch them, and dump them to create a klax of three or more linked blocks. Simple, but so addictive that the box needs a warning.

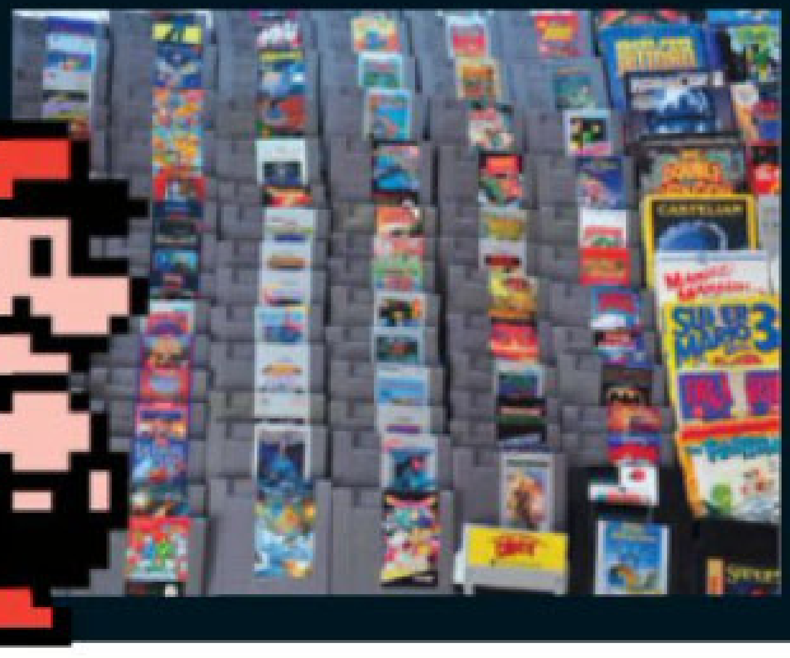




THE COLLECTOR

Martin Brear tells us about his NES collection







How long have you been collecting NES games?
I bought a NES back in 1998. I've been picking up games for it whenever I can ever since.

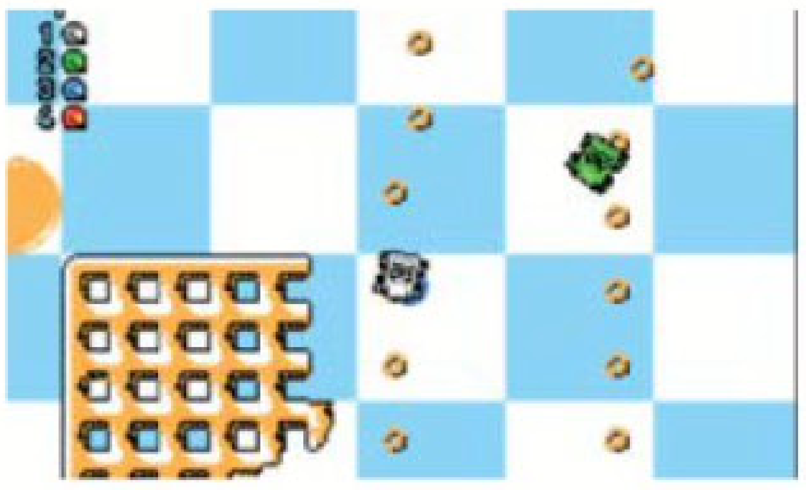
What do you like about it?
It's easily the sheer amount of hidden gems that are available on it. I'm still finding games that are really good that I've never heard of before even now.

Why do you have so many unboxed games?
Games in boxes are very hard to come by, as I assume they were viewed at the time as disposable packaging. Also, unboxed are a lot cheaper!

What's the most expensive NES game you've bought?
I've not spent too much on individual titles. Probably £20 is the highest. I bought *Castlevania 3: Dracula's Curse* from a store in the states for $15 (which is much less than you would ever get it for over here).

What's your favourite game?
That's hard to answer as I like my many obscure arcade conversions. *Life Force* is excellent as are the *Contra* games. *Jackal* is a must-have!

What advice would you give to someone starting to collect for the NES?
Get your NES region modded. It opens up a huge collection of NTSC exclusives at a reasonable price. Most of my collection has come through the US.



MICRO MACHINES 1991

CODEMASTERS

■ Excellent track design, imaginative locations and a large range of dinky vehicles all ensure *Micro Machines* is still as entertaining today as it was in 1991. The controls are incredibly tight and responsive, while the multiplayer remains an absolute riot. An essential racing game all NES owners should play.

BATTLETOADS 1991

RARE

■ While we were tempted to pick *Duck Tales* for our 'tough but fun' choice, we instead settled for this. While it's teeth-gnashingly tough at times, *Battletoads* is also packed with variety, due to Rare cramming in an insane amount of different things for your toads to do, from flying jetplanes to spelunking in tunnels.







CRISIS FORCE 1991

KONAMI

■ This excellent exclusive lets you alter the form of your ship between three primary forms – handy, as the game chucks an insane amount of enemies at you. Despite being highly impressive (it uses Konami's custom VRC4 chip), its extremely late release (the SNES was out by then) meant it's not very well known today

UFOURIA: THE SAGA 1991

SUNSOFT

■ The first part of Sunsoft's *Hebereke* series, which has had intermittent releases outside Japan. It's a cute take on a Metroidvania, as you gain access to the huge game world by rescuing the main character's friends, who have their own abilities. It was significantly changed for its PAL release.



NIGHTSHADE 1992

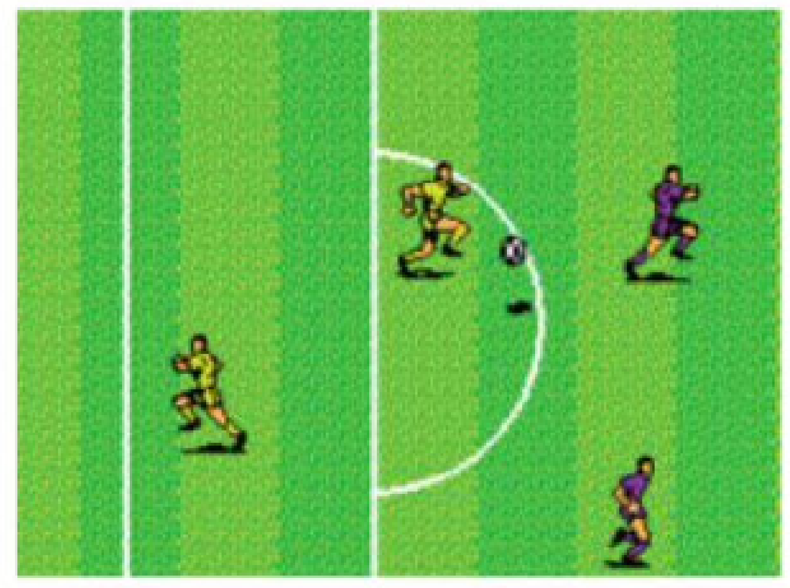
BEAM SOFTWARE



■ This is a dry point-and-click adventure that works surprisingly well considering the lack of buttons on a NES pad. There's a whodunit theme, it's styled to look like a Fifties gumshoe movie, while there are plenty of interesting characters to interact with. Its mechanics would go on to form Beam's *Shadowrun* adaptation for the SNES.

KONAMI HYPER SOCCER 1992

KONAMI

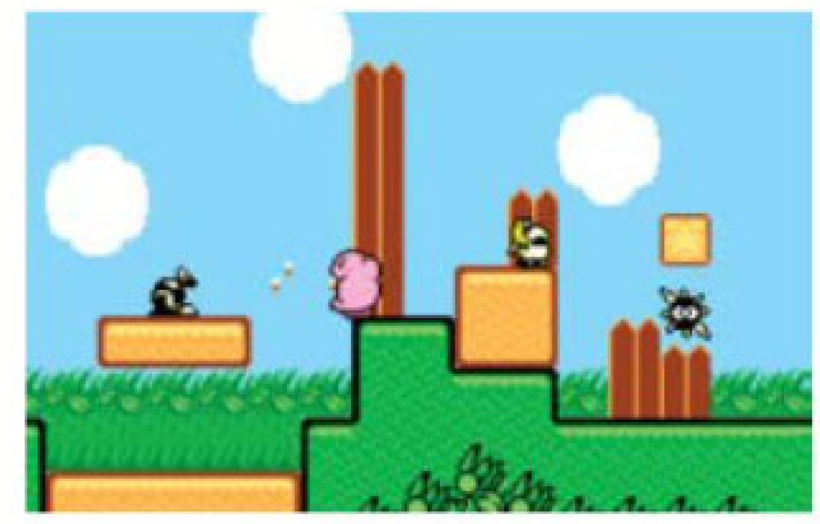


■ The forerunner to Konami's *ISS* and *Winning Eleven* series plays a cracking game of footie. It features cool moves like bicycle kicks and flying headers, a decent array of moves (considering the NES's two-button controller), and the ability to enhance your team through various attributes. Amazingly, Konami only ever released it in Pal regions.

KIRBY'S ADVENTURE 1993

HAL LABORATORY

■ Kirby's first and only NES outing builds on the enjoyable Game Boy game in one key way – you now gain enemies' abilities when you suck them up. It's an incredibly clever mechanic that really allows you to appreciate the flexibility of HAL's cute hero. It boasts some lovely tunes too.

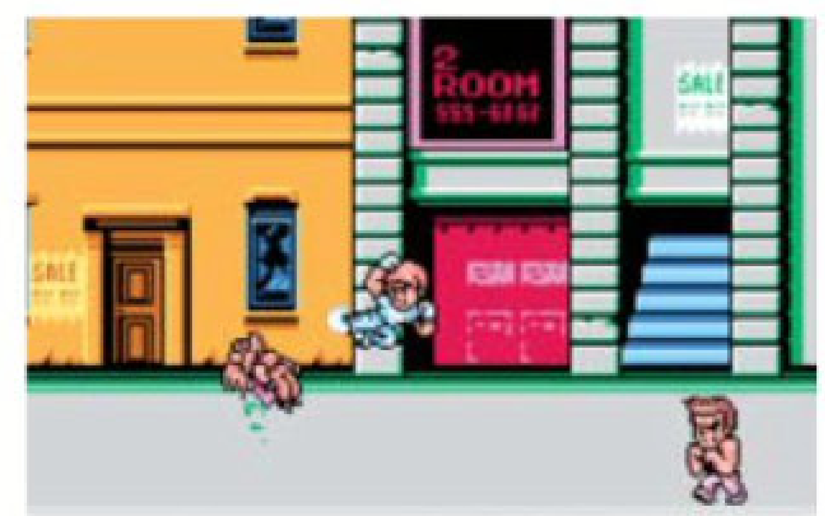


BOMBERMAN II 1991

HUDSON SOFT

■ This NES sequel is a far worthier alternative to the original as it features the excellent Battle Mode. It's admittedly weaker than the PC Engine versions, as it only caters for three players, but it's still a fantastic amount of fun as you attempt to blow each other into oblivion. The single-player mode is good fun too.





MIGHTY FINAL FIGHT 1993

CAPCOM

■ One of Capcom's last games for the NES is a resoundingly good scrolling fighter and a lovely riff on its arcade parent. The 'Super Deformed' art style is delightful, the RPG levelling-up system used makes for some deep gameplay, and it features all three characters. What a pity then that it's only one player.



MORE TO CONSIDER…

- **TIGER HELI (1987) TOAPLAN**
- **WINTER GAMES (1987) RARE**
- **BIO MIRACLE BOKUTTE UPA (1988) KONAMI**
- **SKATE OR DIE! (1988) ELECTRONIC ARTS**
- **ADVENTURES OF LOLO (1989) HAL LABORATORY**
- **ARCHON (1989) FREE FALL ASSOCIATES**
- **DUCKTALES (1989) CAPCOM**
- **ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS (1989) KOEI**
- **DR. MARIO (1990) NINTENDO R&D1**
- **SOLSTICE: THE QUEST FOR THE STAFF OF DEMNOS (1990) SOFTWARE CREATIONS**

BEHIND THE SCENES

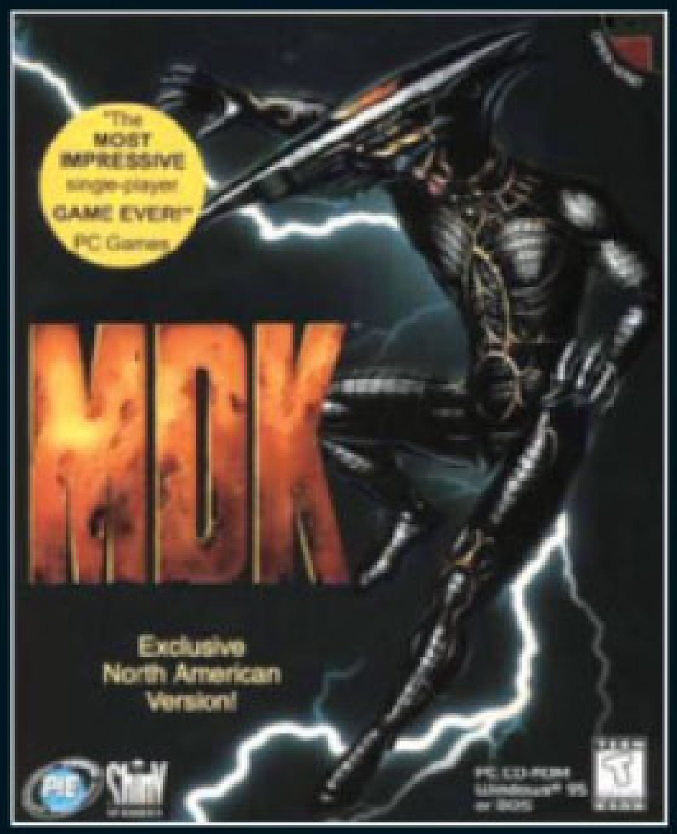


MDK

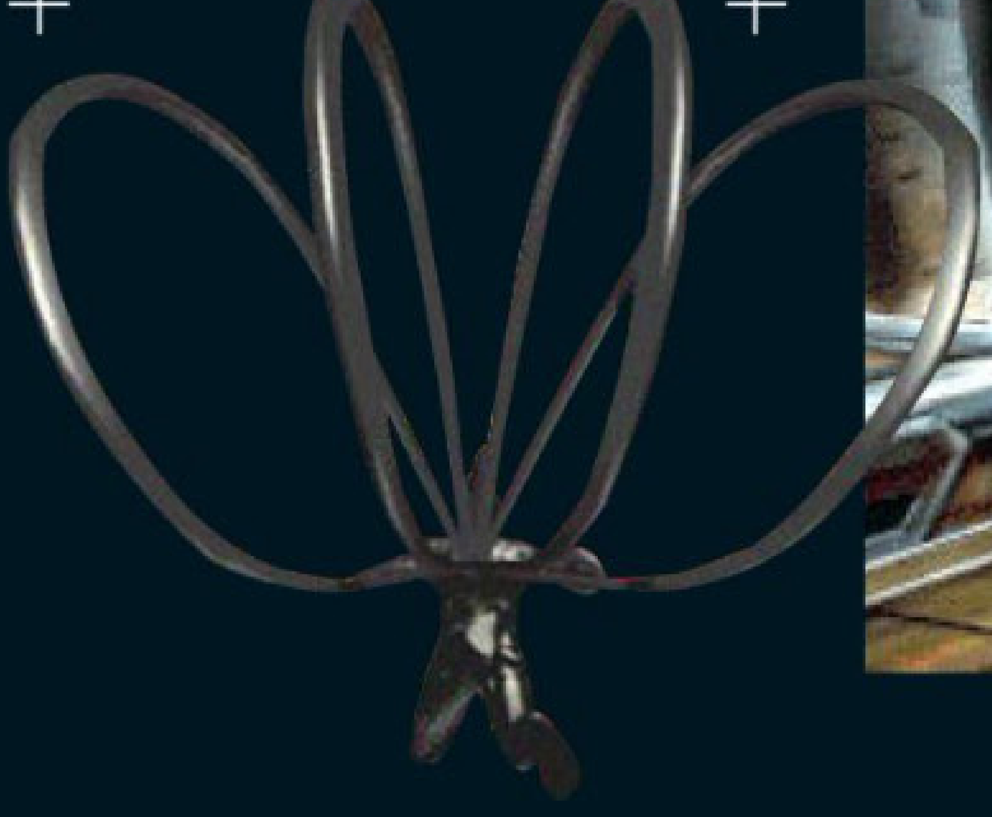
Is it Mission: Deliver Kindness? Murder Death Kill? Max, Dr. Hawkins and Kurt? Or Massive Dollops of Ketchup? Whatever the meaning of MDK, it's a fast, beautiful and novel Nineties shooter. games™ spoke to two men behind its creation



MDK's elegant vistas remain impressive today.



Released: 1997
Format: DOS & Windows, PlayStation
Publisher: Interplay (Europe), Playmates Interactive Entertainment (US)
Key Staff (DOS/Windows): Nick Bruty (design), Tim Williams (design), Tommy Tallarico Studios (music & sound), Shawn Nelson (design, animation), Andy Astor, Martin Brownlow (coding)
Additional Key Staff (PlayStation): Mick West, Christer Ericson (coding)



THE SEEDS OF ***MDK*** were sown in 1993 when industry veteran David Perry left Virgin Interactive to form Shiny Entertainment, with several colleagues accompanying him. Having had outstanding success with Disney adaptations of *The Jungle Book* and *Aladdin*, a similar group would work on Shiny's first games, *Earthworm Jim* and its sequel. Part of that team was Nick Bruty. "A few of us left [Virgin] around the same time, shortly after we finished *Aladdin*," begins Bruty. "The others joined a little later once we were set up."

While successful both critically and commercially, the *Earthworm Jim* games were similar to the products Bruty had been working on at Virgin. "*MDK* was a reaction, or outburst, from having worked back-to-back on cartoon games such as *Aladdin*, *Jungle Book* and *Earthworm Jim*," he explains. "Don't get me wrong, I loved working on those games and learning new styles; but my heart is in fantasy and science fiction. I knew straight away that this was what I wanted to do next."

With a chosen style and genre in mind, the genesis of *MDK* happened very quickly, as Bruty explains. "I was doodling one day when I came up with the suit and sniper image. Then the outline of the game arrived about five minutes later!" Bruty formed a new team for his game with only himself and coder Andy Astor migrating over from the *Earthworm Jim* development group. The rest of the team would comprise Tim Williams (story and design), Bob Stevenson (art and design), animator Shawn Nelson and, latterly, programmer Martin Brownlow.

"Bob and I were very good friends," says Bruty, "and we were looking to work together. I took Tim and Bob to lunch and showed them my outline for the game and they were instantly on board. This was before we'd even pitched the game to our publisher. In the end there were only six of us, so there was a lot of overlapping duties." In addition to the fresh line-up, a new system was to be the target for the game. By 1995, the Sega Mega Drive was somewhat on its last legs, looking exceedingly creaky in the face of PC games that took the player into the third dimension.

"I wanted to work on PC because the game was 3D, which wasn't an option on consoles at that point," reveals Bruty. "It also meant I wouldn't have to tone the game down to deal with the Sega and Nintendo's ratings boards," says Tim Williams. "I loved [the concept]. I could see immediately the game would have a unique look and plenty of design opportunities. We were all big fans of the *Alien* movies and HR Giger, so that probably had some influence. But I also just liked presenting people with the unexpected, so that around every corner there was something different and interesting."

Despite the explosion of the first-person-shooter in the mid-Nineties, Bruty was adamant that his suit design for the protagonist, a strange mix of the work of Giger and the movie *Dune*, would not be wasted and remain visible for the majority of the game. "I always wanted third-person for the platforming elements," he adds. "I also feel the player is more involved in the world when they can see their own character."



Relaxing back on the Jim Dandy after mission one.

Fellow designer Williams agrees. "We wanted the player to see all the cool actions the main character would be performing, so third-person was the natural choice and challenge we went for." While Bruty states the initial style of the suit was rooted in functionality, it too was a reaction, this time to other games on the market. "At the time most of the other action games out there were very clunky and hardcore-looking," he says. "I wanted something with more flair and elegance. I remember looking at a lot of old Spanish armour for the decoration and flourish."

MDK's plot, given Bruty's fondness for the genre, is classic old-school science fiction. The player controls the oddly-named Kurt Hectic, a janitor in the employ of eccentric scientist Dr. Hawkins. "Bob, Tim and I were watching the Mike Leigh movie, *Naked*," says Bruty. "And there's a scene where David Thewlis is listening to this strung-out guy on the street. The man is talking incessantly and Thewlis stops him to ask 'What is it like in your head? Hectic?', and for some reason that line stuck with us. We went round repeating it for days, so when it came to naming our hero, it just popped up." Williams recalls how the hero got his first name. "Bob and I had a character in another game called Kurt, who was named after Kurt Cobain. And since Kurt's life in *MDK* was pretty hectic, we put the two together."

With Kurt and Dr. Hawkins aboard their spaceship, the Jim Dandy, along with a robotic dog named Max, the Earth is attacked by an army of aliens called Stream Riders. Using energy streams, the aliens invade and systematically begin to strip the planet of its natural resources using giant machines called mine crawlers, not caring if any human cities stand in their way. The Stream Riders' army consists of a variety of robotic creatures, the most common of which is the monkey-like grunt and in a manner similar to the classic arcade game, *Gauntlet*, the grunts are dispensed from generators. Until the specific generator is destroyed by Kurt, they'll just keep on coming.

Kurt's mission is to destroy all the mine crawlers one-by-one and free the Earth from the grasp of the despicable aliens. To help him, Dr. Hawkins has outfitted him with a 'coil suit', an elegant skin-tight armour that protects him from not only enemy fire, but also the pressures of re-entering Earth's atmosphere. Kurt also possesses a chain gun with unlimited ammunition, which is housed within his helmet. When he returns the helmet to his head, the chain gun becomes a hands-free sniper rifle, essential for taking out many of the game's ranged enemies. Yet while Bruty confirms the sniper rifle was the very first thing he drew along with the suit, and that "everything was built around that concept, and all of Kurt's abilities were meant to support it," it was only originally meant to be used at the end of each level.

"It was going to be a game where you just run and gun," explains Williams. "But then we decided to free the player to switch into sniper mode whenever they wanted." Finally, our hero has a parachute strapped to his back called a ribbon chute, which opens whenever he falls. "The ribbon chute was again part of the original design," says Bruty. "I wanted the main character to be much more aerial, like Spider-Man. I wanted him to be able to cling to walls as that was the whole point of a hands-free sniper rifle." Doctor Hawkins supplements these abilities by dropping useful items such as grenades and bombs to help Kurt penetrate each arena.

Work proper began on *MDK* early in 1996. Two things were considered paramount: the art style and pace of the game. "Bob [Stevenson] and I split artwork duties,"



Another beautiful scene, this time from level two.

MOODY, DARK. (KIND OF)

More on MDK's brilliant score

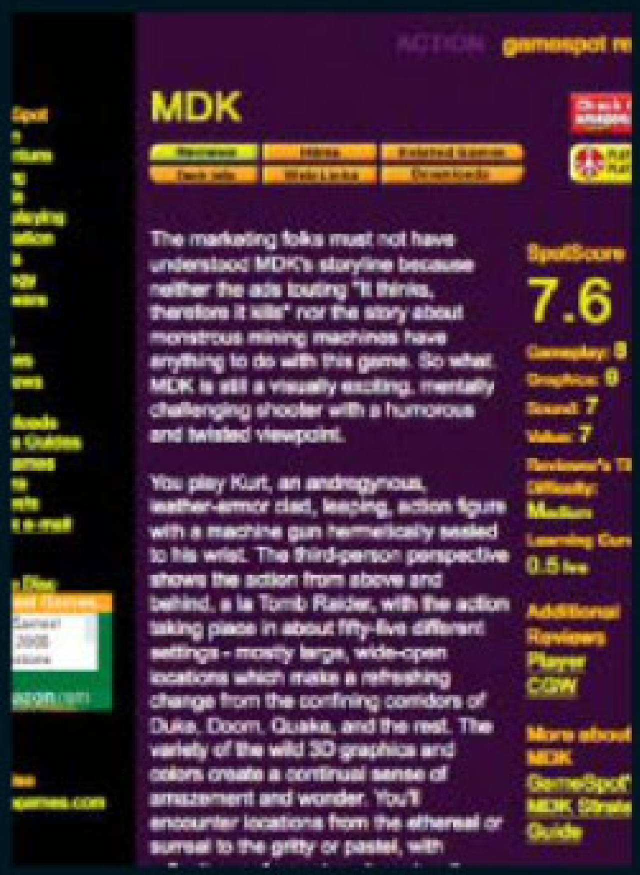
THE SHIFT TO CD-based storage in the early-mid Nineties created a huge change in videogame music. Having cut his teeth at Virgin Interactive, Tommy Tallarico was in charge of making Nick Bruty's vision for *MDK*'s music a reality.

"We had a good relationship with Dave Perry after the *Earthworm Jim* games," says Tallarico. "I would go into Shiny once a week and spend a whole day implementing the music and working with the designers. Nick had a vision about the music and would give me different soundtracks that he liked, such as stuff by Danny Elfman and *Star Trek* scores."

Tallarico toned down his favoured instrument, the guitar, in favour of a more operatic and orchestral sound, infused with various influences and echoing the game's mischievous sense of humour and together with Todd Dennis and Joey Kuras, created *MDK*'s imperious soundtrack. "For me, art, design and music all go hand-in-hand," he says. "So I listen to film scores while I work. For *MDK*, I listened to a lot of *Total Recall* and *Dune*."



WHAT THEY SAID…


MDK

The marketing folks must not have understood MDK's storyline because neither the ads touting "It thinks, therefore it kills" nor the story about monstrous mining machines have anything to do with this game. So what. MDK is still a visually exciting, mentally challenging shooter with a humorous and twisted viewpoint.

You play Kurt, an androgynous, leather-armor clad, leaping, action figure with a machine gun hermetically sealed to his wrist. The third-person perspective shows the action from above and behind, a la Tomb Raider, with the action taking place in about fifty-five different settings - mostly large, wide-open locations which make a refreshing change from the confining corridors of Duke, Doom, Quake, and the rest. The variety of the wild 3D graphics and colors create a continual sense of amazement and wonder. You'll encounter locations from the ethereal or surreal to the gritty or pastel, with

SpotScore 7.6

Shiny has created another stylish, funny shooter which lands solidly in the 3D shooting adventure gaming genre, with a heavy emphasis on shooting.

GameSpot, 1997




MDK developers Nick Bruty (left) and Tim Williams (right).

says Bruty, "and between us we built everything you see: levels, characters, special effects. I love coming up with stuff like that, but building it was another matter." Initially, *MDK* had just one coder on board. "We had Shawn [Nelson] on animation, and the last to join was Martin Brownlow. Until then, Andy Astor had been programming the game single-handedly. Smart guy!" Being the mid-Nineties, there was no such thing as off-the-shelf engines for developers to work with – *MDK* had to be built from the ground up.

"Also, 3D was very new back then and we were scrambling around in the dark trying to work out what was possible," notes Bruty. The game was being developed at an awkward time: 3D gaming was burgeoning thanks to the runaway success of *Doom* and *Quake*, but the arrival of graphic 3D hardware cards had yet to have a notable effect on software development. *MDK*'s graphics would be designed to operate in software, making their speed and beauty even more impressive, with patches soon available after release to take advantage of hardware accelerators.

"We had no idea how fast we could get the engine when we started," remembers Bruty. "The game would run too slow if we textured everything, so some parts were just flat-shaded for speed. We did our best to make that look like a design choice, or shadows, but it was a tricky balance." Tim Williams took Bruty's concepts and worked them into the game environment, with the need for speed paramount. "I wanted it to be fast and seamless," he says, "so that you could run along, jump, go into a glide, and then suddenly get lifted up onto a rooftop by a vertical fan, all without too many button presses."

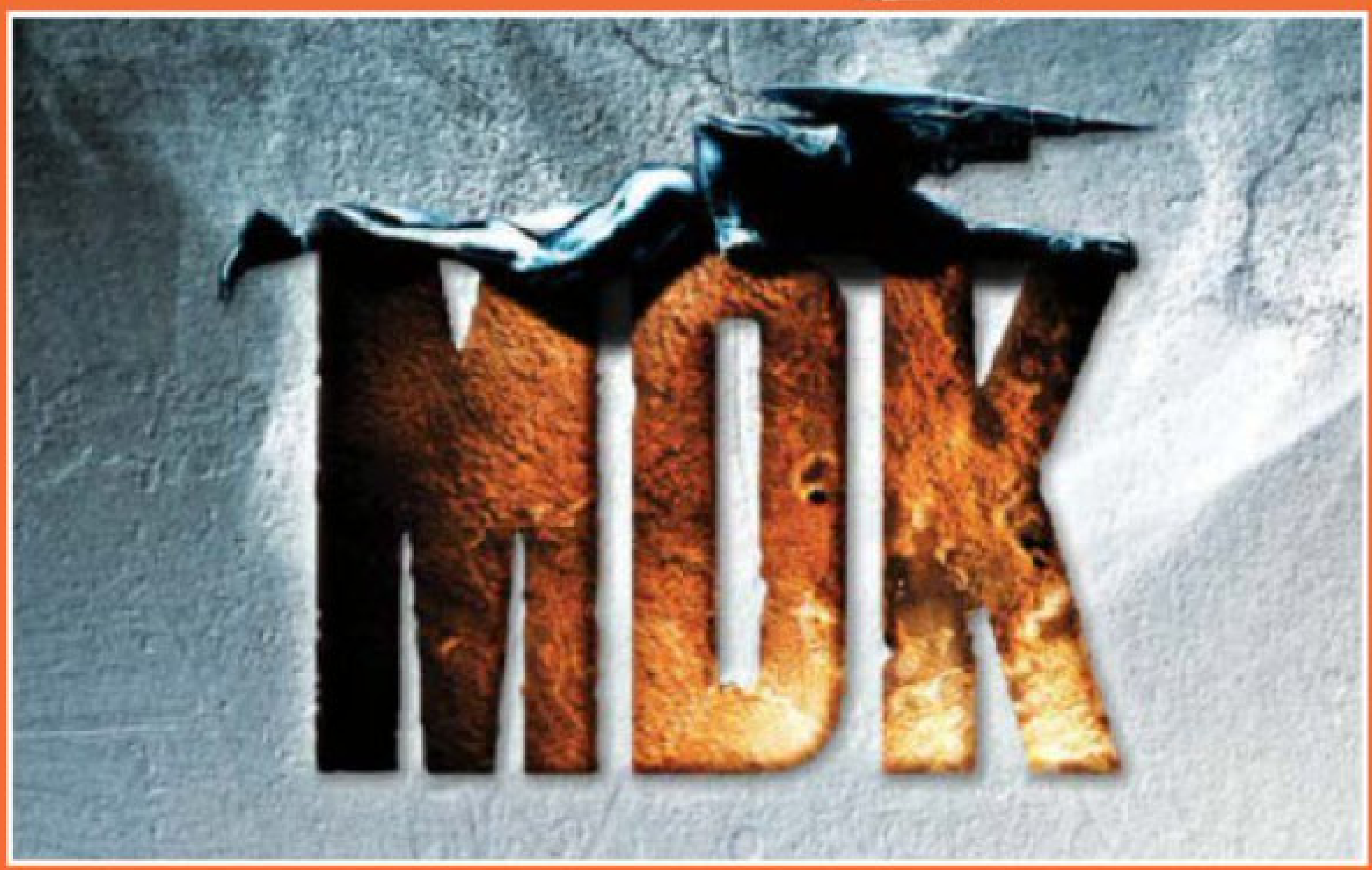
While the core game and imagery remained similar to Bruty's original design, bizarre elements began to creep in, such as a headache-inducing bright paint-splat colour level and a pick-up entitled the 'world's smallest nuclear explosion'. "There was no-one to rein us in so we just kept pushing it further and further," says Bruty. "If it made us laugh or gasp, it went in!" Other levels included an insane asylum and a fully-operational submarine that takes Kurt beneath the waves. Animator Shawn Nelson did the team proud by creating an impressively nimble lead character. "Although we did waste a small amount of budget on a very early motion-capture system that completely failed to work in any way," recalls Bruty wryly. "However, we got to make Tim [Williams] dress up in a leotard, so it was almost worth it!"

Bruty and his design colleagues also got the opportunity to be particularly inventive inside the tunnel sections that linked each enemy-laden arena. While these effectively acted as cover for the loading of the next stage, Bruty and Williams found ways to make

WE WANTED THE PLAYER TO SEE ALL THE COOL ACTIONS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER

these areas more exciting for the player. "In my experience, such mini-games can almost happen by accident," notes Williams. "And that was the case with the snowboarding part." In one of the later tunnels, Kurt must dodge enemies while descending at breakneck pace. Like all of these sections, it neatly breaks up the relentless shooting action of the arenas. "I had planned for a unique motorbike for Kurt," says Bruty, "with these large roller balls, but it only got as far as a sketch. We also wanted more situations where you climbed inside enemy robots such as in the first level." At the conclusion of this part, Kurt must clamber inside a pyramid-shaped alert robot in order to bypass a particularly well-fortified gathering of enemies.

However, any plans for further complexity were soon abandoned, if considered at all. "We wanted things pretty



THE NAME GAME

So what does MDK actually stand for?

EVEN GAMES™ WOULD have to admit it was an inspired advertising campaign, and today the true meaning of the acronym 'MDK' remains cloudy. Two popular theories were *Mission: Deliver Kindness* and *Murder Death Kill*, with the latter having debuted in the Sylvester Stallone sci-fi action movie, *Demolition Man*. "Actually, you've managed to pick my favourite and the actual name there," says Bruty teasingly. But while Tim Williams clarifies and confirms *Murder Death Kill* as the team's original idea, they were soon all pondering over alternative meanings. "My contribution was *Mission: Deliver Kindness*," says Williams, "so that, for me, was what *MDK* meant." Other possibilities included *Mother's Day Kisses*, *Max, Dr. Hawkins And Kurt* and *Massive Dollops Of Ketchup*.



FROM PC TO PLAYSTATION

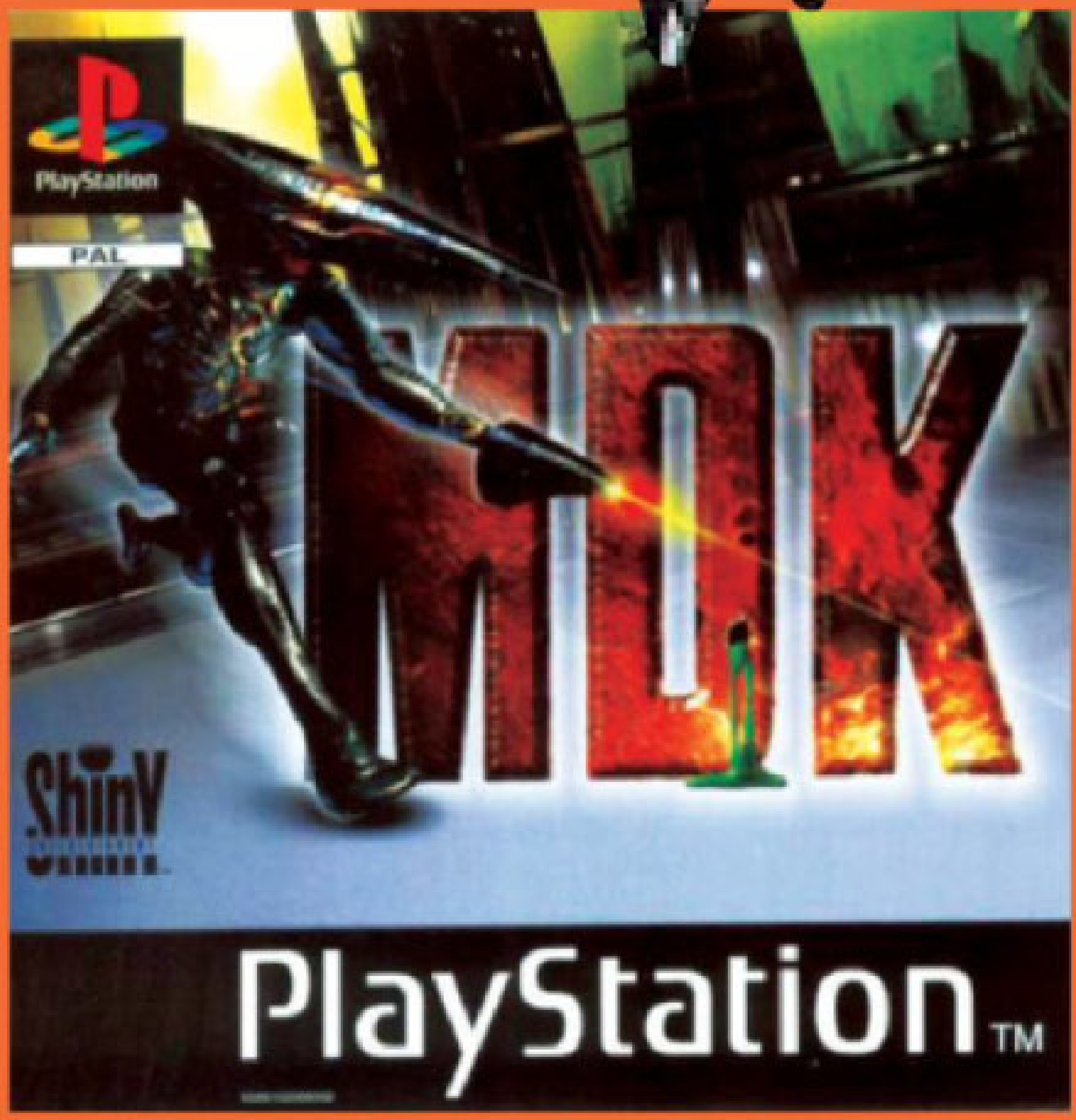
Mick West of the Neversoft team takes us through its PlayStation conversion for Interplay.

■ "*MDK* WAS MY type of game, a fun shooter, although we weren't involved until about half way through its development. I also liked the odd combination of stylistic settings combined with humour.

"But they [Shiny] didn't have the available staff to do the PlayStation version, and they needed it done by the holidays. We tried to keep as much of the code unchanged as possible but the graphics had to be downsized to fit into the PlayStation, both for the reduced memory and for the lower polygon-pushing power.

"The biggest technical issue was fitting everything into the memory as the console had about a quarter the memory of the PC. This was largely done by simplifying graphics and loading things incrementally. We also spent a lot of time tweaking the control system as it's hard to simulate a mouse with just a D-pad. Fortunately the sniper mode, despite requiring fine accuracy, was slow-paced, so fairly easy to line up with the pad; but there was a lot of code going on under the hood to help the player hit the target.

"It was a pivotal game for me personally, but it was rushed out and had loads of bugs. It was a nightmare to finally finish. But I learned from it and it was an outstanding game for the time, and still holds up today."



WHAT THEY SAID...



PC Review	
Category	3D Action
Players	1
Difficulty	Medium/Hard
Review Date	5/97
Publisher	Shiny, Playmates Interactive Entertainment

"Aim a little lower...no, lower...there, right there!"

MDK is fun to play and has a great sense of humor. [It] combines sweet graphics and revolutionary gameplay and design concepts to put it in a class by itself.

Game Revolution, 1997

simple in this game. Just fun action, with surprises, and innovative weaponry," says Williams. Bruty reinforces this, stating, "I would have only included more gameplay elements if the game had been more open world. But as a linear game, no. It was more fun to make unique items in specific locations and keep surprising the player. I definitely wanted the player to have no idea about what was going to happen next!"

Before we move on to the commercial release of *MDK*, **games™** asks its two designers about the game's manual. Bruty smiles. "We thought the manual would be handled by the publisher, but they passed it to us and we just tried to make it more interesting." After the obligatory system notes and guide to controls, *MDK*'s manual is taken over by the ever-so-slightly-unhinged Dr. Fluke Hawkins and his journal. Written by Tim Williams in a humorous style, it sets up the game effectively.

"I wrote it, and I suppose that was my way of getting more character into the game," he recalls. "The idea of writing a manual – at the last minute – was very boring to me, so I wanted to create something fun for not only the player, but for myself as well. And then Shawn Nelson drew the illustrations throughout. It was actually fun, and we got it done very quickly." Having fostered a love of *MDK*'s characters and their interaction, Williams went one further and wrote a screenplay, before moving on to other projects.

For the initial pitch to *MDK*'s US publisher, Playmates Interactive Entertainment, Bruty created a set of storyboards in an attempt to adequately sell the game. "It was a disaster," he cringes, "as I could see they were expecting another *Earthworm Jim*-type game. They had no idea what was going on with snipers and ribbon chutes." Midway through Shiny's unfortunate pitch, the result of the O.J. Simpson trial was announced.

"So they all rushed out of the room to watch that," recalls Bruty, "and we realised storyboards were not going to cut it. So we rushed out a video concept in a few weeks and that hit the spot – we were instantly greenlit. After that they left us mostly alone. Having done *Earthworm Jim* for them, they felt they were in good hands, and David Perry played the ambassador, meaning I had little dealings with them – which is how I like it!"



■ Several later levels are quite bizarre.

THERE WAS NO ONE TO REIN US IN SO WE JUST KEPT PUSHING IT FURTHER AND FURTHER

MDK was a critical success both domestically and in the US. With the stiff competition **games™** mentioned earlier, sales were harder to come by. "But it did sell well, despite not being a blockbuster," remembers Bruty. "And obviously enough to warrant a sequel. Everyone wanted us to do *MDK2* straight away, but I wanted a break from it. I hadn't liked rushing from *Earthworm Jim* to its sequel without a creative break, and I felt the game suffered because of that." With another project in mind, the sprawling epic *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*, Bruty and Williams left Shiny while hoping

> A GAMING EVOLUTION MDK > GoldenEye > Sniper Elite



MDK pioneered the use of a free-form sniper rifle in first-person view, that would go on to be mimicked by plenty of games.



Rare's *GoldenEye* popularised the concept before *Sniper Elite* turned it into an entire basis for a game.



Interplay would wait until they were ready. "But they wanted to move forward, so I had to let it go. It was tough, but they were funding *Giants*, so I didn't have any beef with them. It was just one of those things."

With a focus on gameplay dynamic and art style, Shiny created a game that is revered still today, and just as playable as it was almost 20 years ago. "I'm very proud of what we accomplished, and the fact we did it with such a small team," says Tim Williams. "It could only be done by us all wearing different hats and mucking in together. I think we're seeing some similar development these days with small indie teams and that's pretty much how it was for us."

Nick Bruty ultimately reflects on how a new IP such as *MDK* was given a relatively easy ride; a rare occurrence today as well as in 1997 when the game was released. "I enjoyed that period of time when major publishers like Interplay would take a chance on a new property like that. Sadly, after *Giants* and *Armed & Dangerous*, no-one wanted to take those risks anymore. Hopefully crowdfunding can help us return to making these types of games again." While maybe not original in terms of gameplay, MDK certainly had enough style and humour to set it apart from the crowd. "I've heard that many people see it as a classic which is interesting," concludes Williams, "because it was by far the most fun I've ever had working on a game."



The sniper rifle was easy to use and had an impressive zoom capability.



MDK's sequel recently received an HD remake.







INTERVIEW

TOM KALINSKE

Call him the underdog but when Tom Kalinske became president and CEO of Sega of America, he was determined not to play second fiddle for too long

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Sonic The Hedgehog 2 (1992)
Executive support



Sonic & Knuckles (1994)
Executive management



Sonic The Hedgehog 3 (1994)
Executive management

When did you first become interested in videogames?

I worked at Mattel, and in the late Seventies we started doing handheld electronic games such as *Football* and *Auto Race*. They were part of my product group and they were successful, but there were also a couple of very talented guys who had the idea for trying to create a videogame machine that was a bit better than Atari. The board got very excited and they spun that division out to form Intellivision. But, frankly, I was a little annoyed because I was the exec VP of the toy division and this was a good piece of business they were taking away.

Is that why you left Mattel?

When Intellivision declined, it just so happened that most of the other subsidiaries of the company also did poorly and by then I was the president of the toy division. They said I had to save Mattel. We had the choice of filing Chapter 11 bankruptcy or finding financing. We went with very, very high interest debt refinancing but it saved the company. You can imagine that my feelings about videogames were sort of mixed. In a way, videogames had caused all of these problems at Mattel. I kind of blamed the board for taking Intellivision away from me.

What did you eventually do?

I became CEO of Matchbox. I brought it out of receivership in the UK, turned it around and took it public. We had really good distribution in Europe and we were starting to build up the distribution in the US and Australia. And then Hayao Nakayama [the then president of Sega Enterprises] contacted me then said, 'Talk us through the handling of our 8-bit business in the US. We think you can do a better job, so we would like you to take that on'. And I looked at it – the Sega Master System versus the NES – and I called him back. I said, 'I don't think you have enough difference here and I don't really want to take that on'. So I turned it down.

NINTENDO WAS FURIOUS WITH US. THEY THREATENED TO SUE A BUNCH OF TIMES

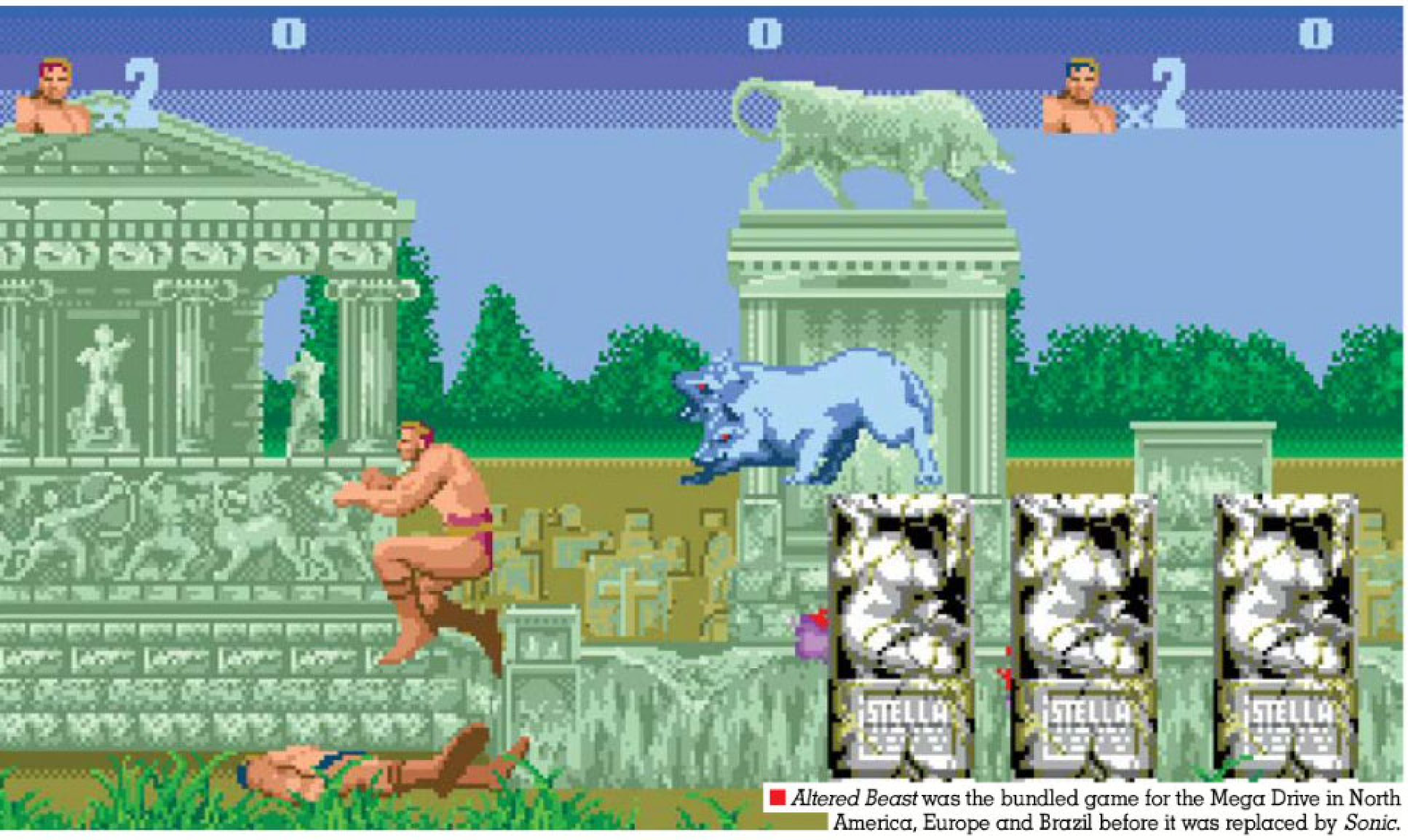
What made you change your mind?

Eventually we sold Matchbox and I was on a beach in Hawaii on vacation with my young family. Hayao came over and he said I had to see



SEGA'S EA RUN-IN

"WHEN TOM KALINSKE discovered EA had reverse-engineered the Sega Mega Drive, he was incensed: "You bet! I went to a meeting with EA and saw Trip Hawkins. I said, 'Trip, didn't your mother ever teach you the difference between right and wrong?' That started things off on a very rocky footing but eventually we ended up making a very good business deal where they got favoured licensing rights and we got *John Madden Football*.""



Altered Beast was the bundled game for the Mega Drive in North America, Europe and Brazil before it was replaced by *Sonic*.

the 16-bit Genesis and I had to look at the handheld that was going to become the Game Gear colour LCD handheld. He was very persuasive and so I went with him. I fell in love with the opportunity of doing much higher quality, better graphics and, in my opinion, better games and that is what got me back into it.

What caught your imagination?

I thought the difference between 16-bit games and NES games was very dramatic and that there was a very real opportunity to market the Genesis. I thought the Game Gear was sensationally different than a one-colour, grey, black, white Game Boy. I was really in love with the Game Gear and I thought, boy, full colour on a handheld machine you can take anywhere with you: that's fantastic. The only problem was a limitation on battery. If we had been able to solve that problem it would have been a much better product.

What did you initially do at Sega?

I took a couple of months analysing the market and then I went to Japan with a few guys and presented a five-point plan to the board and said, 'Look, we can really build a business here, but the price of the Genesis is too high and we need to get it down'. I thought we needed to be more competitive and more aggressive with the pricing. We needed to get rid of the software that was included and replace it with our best title, which at that point looked like it was going to become *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

And what did they say?

The board said, 'We don't agree with any of your ideas, you're nuts, get out of here, go home,' but Hayao Nakayama turned up at the door and said, 'Well, I don't agree either but I promised that you would make the decisions for the US, the areas of software and marketing so therefore go ahead and do what you want to do.' And so we did. Without his support it could not have happened.

How did you go about persuading people to buy Sega's machines?

We needed to take Nintendo on in advertising. We positioned them as the little kids brand and us as the big boy, teenage, college-age brand. We also had to develop a lot more software in the United States that was sports-orientated and for older audiences as well as licence software from popular media like movies, TV shows, fighters, NFL or whatever.

Was it important to open the US market?

Nintendo had 98 per cent of the market – they owned it and they were very comfortable owning it. They dismissed third-parties, which ended up working to our advantage. Eventually the third-party developers got pissed off and they slowly started to come over to our side. The big advantage we had was Electronic Arts. They had reverse engineered the Genesis but we ended up having an extremely close and friendly relationship with them. I think at one point Sega in the mid-Nineties represented about 60% of their revenue and around 80% of their profits.

What were the key moments for the console?

Getting Sonic *The Hedgehog* in the hardware. No-one had seen a character with that speed, and colours used in that way. *Sonic* drove massive sales. We were able to introduce *Sonic 2*, which was probably the best *Sonic* game. That did more business than the movies of the year and made $300m or $400m.

How did you get the word out?

We had emissaries on campuses in the US – game players who got a free Genesis and free games and just had to go around playing it and talking up Sega. We did a mall tour where we had a NES and a Genesis and asked people to play and tell us which they preferred. We won 80 per cent of the time in every market in the US. Our TV advertising was very aggressive. We made fun of Nintendo and they were furious with us. They threatened to sue a bunch of times.

Sega ended up with a large slice of the market.

We grew to be the market leader. We also had a good relationship with Sony. They had a studio in Santa Monica and they asked for help to make better software. We sent a team and the head of R&D to teach them to make better software. As time went on, we fell in love with optical disc media but it was hard to find anyone interested in doing something with it so we formed a venture with Sony and we supported Digital Pictures and others to jointly develop CD-ROM optical disc games for the Sega-CD. We learned so much.



THE SEGA CHANNEL

"THE SEGA CHANNEL is one people often forget," says Tom Kalinske. "It was a huge effort and it helped us in marketing because it showed we were forward thinking, even if people didn't want to sign up. We had 250,000 subscribers at one point. It was a really successful first effort for a subscription service."



Sega adverts were typically manic and they were not afraid of upsetting Nintendo either.



■ Much was made by Sega of the Game Gear's full colour screen. Kalinske says it was one of the things which attracted him to work for the firm.

There was also the cartridge-based Sega 32X…
The 32X was not so much fun. We wanted to keep Genesis alive for longer. We'd argued with Sega Japan about what the specs of the system might be and then out of the blue the 32X appeared as an intermediate step to help keep the Genesis alive. We could make 32-bit claims about the games. As I recall, Sega of Japan was supposed to do six games for it and we were supposed to do six but everyone had problems. We got one game from Japan and a couple ourselves. We didn't have enough games and the ones we did weren't good enough. That was a big headache for us.

The CD-ROM-based Sega Saturn launched in the same year. Did it confuse the market?
I didn't want to bring out the Saturn at all that year. I was open about that and this was the first time I was overruled. I wanted to wait until the following year and introduce it at the same time as the machines being introduced by our competitors. It was too confusing to market all of these systems at the same time. But the machine was introduced even earlier than we thought. We didn't have enough at the CES show or for the retailers. We could only supply three retailers so the others were pissed off at us and it was just a disaster. It was a really dumb, dumb decision. I blame myself that I couldn't convince him not to do that.

Sega was also key in setting up E3…
In the early Nineties, CES was huge but it treated the gaming industry poorly. We were put in the back, past the new gadgets, computers, stereos and TVs. One year, we were in a tent and it was raining. Our Genesis machines got wet and I said, 'That's it, we're not coming back'. We set out to form our own show with favoured third-parties. It became E3. I actually went back to E3 this year and it reminded me of the past. It was exciting with the AR and VR stuff.

Before you left Sega in 1996, there was another handheld launch: the Sega Nomad. What happened there?
The Nomad was to be a portable 16-bit system but it was too big. Nintendo would brag that you could put a Game Boy in your pocket and there were a lot of advantages to that.

THE THIRD-PARTY DEVELOPERS GOT PISSED OFF AND STARTED TO COME TO OUR SIDE…

Is size what damaged the Atari Lynx?
Size and not enough software was an issue – it usually comes down to that. The Lynx never got off the ground.

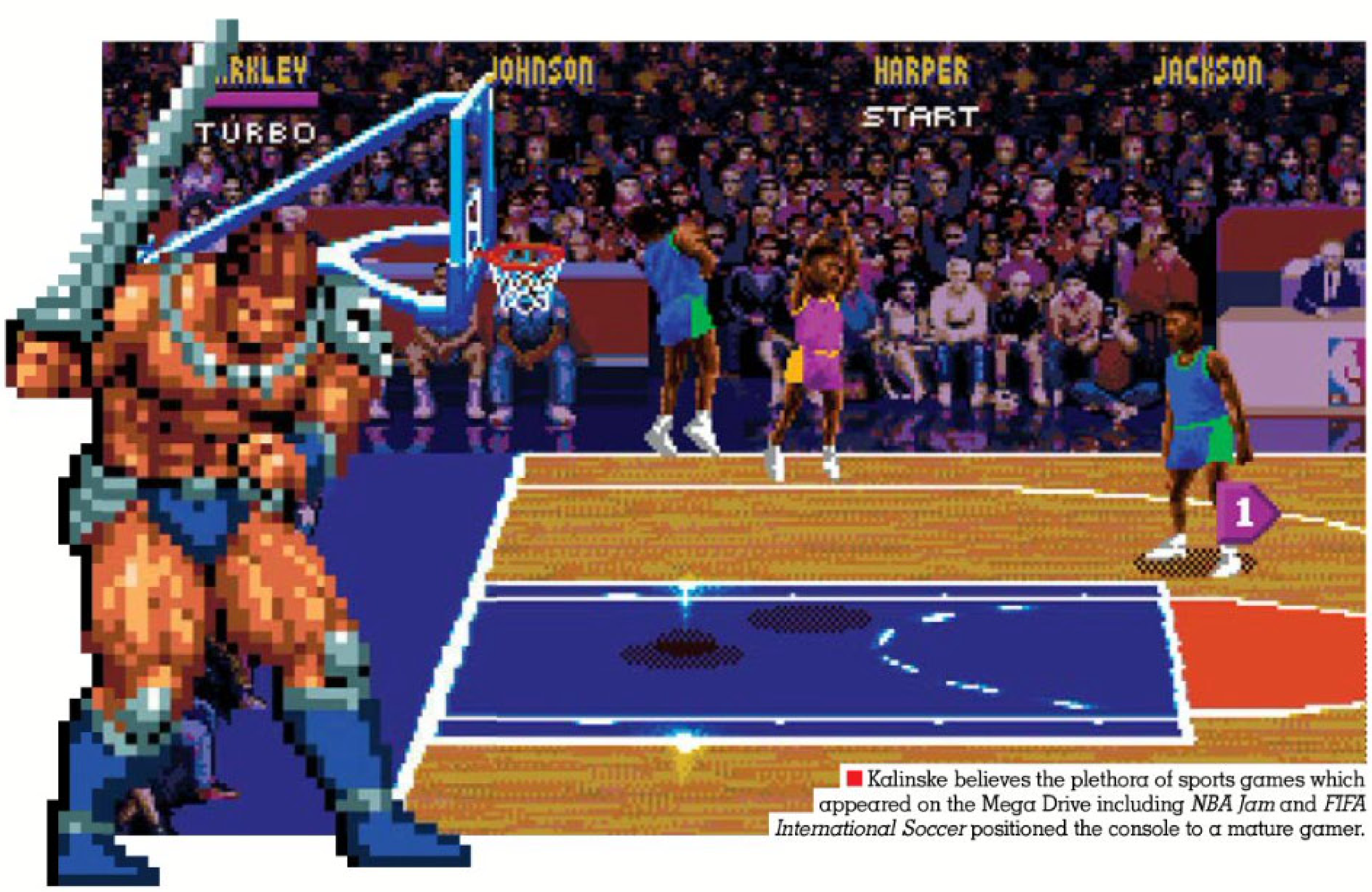
How was life after Sega?
I did a number of things, including setting up Leapfrog to improve education via the use of technology, whether for young kids, older kids or adults. I also helped start 36 different companies. Some failed but at the end of nine years, we had $2 to $3 billion of revenue overall.

There has been a lot of interest in your story. Were you surprised Blake Harris contacted you for his book, *Console Wars*?
Very much so. I thought he was nuts. He contacted me at a New York toy fair and I said, 'Who in the world would care about a six-year time period of the videogame industry?' And he said I didn't understand and that a whole lot of people are really interested in Sega, Nintendo, Atari and would like to hear it. He was very persistent and convinced me. I spent so much time with him in New York City and out here. He practically lived here and interviewed everyone I knew – about 200 people – and wrote the book.

And now it's going to be a documentary and a film…
I am in the documentary a lot, so I'm very much involved there. A lot of it was shot here at my home and in the Sega offices, which was kinda fun. But when you see the documentary, remember I'm not an actor, so you gotta lower your expectation of my performance! But hopefully it will be of interest to a lot of people. It's in final editing now and Blake says he's targeting mid-September to finish it.

Who would you like to play you in the film?
I keep hoping it's someone with an appearance similar to me 30 years ago. My daughters are hoping for a young up and coming actor – Bradley Cooper.

Does your family think it's interesting?
My daughters were very young when this was all occurring but I guess they remember it fondly with all of the Sonic stuff around here. Everyone is surprised at the interest level. I get a lot of calls from people into retro gaming. They ask if I still have Genesis. I usually do.



■ Kalinske believes the plethora of sports games which appeared on the Mega Drive including *NBA Jam* and *FIFA International Soccer* positioned the console to a mature gamer.

GAME CHANGERS

SUPER MARIO KART

Released: 1 September 1992 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EAD **System:** SNES



The Japanese *Super Mario Kart* features animations of Peach and Bowser chugging away at champagne. This was removed in the NA version of the game.

The SNES' most famous racer wasn't meant to be a *Mario* game when it was first being developed, but when the programmers decided to shift their efforts to a *Mario Kart* game, they never knew they'd change gaming forever

SUPER MARIO KART is widely acknowledged as the game that started an entire genre – without it, we wouldn't have the mascot kart racing games we know and love today. As with the majority of other Nintendo games, *Super Mario Kart* was a trailblazer – a game that inspired many clones and imitators, but no one could live up to the incredible formula that Nintendo worked into the game, creating something that was incredibly accessible to players of all ages, but still incredibly deep, once you lifted the hood and understood how the game actually worked.

Less than two years after *Super Mario Kart*'s release, long-time *Mario* rival *Sonic* released his own kart game (*Sonic Drift*), followed by Ubisoft's *Street Racer* on the SNES in 1994. The impact of the game's release was tangible on the whole industry – it created the genre, that's a given, but it also proved that games and their characters were never limited to just one game style. *Super Mario Kart* was the first time we saw *Mario* characters outside a platform game setting, and their collective transition to this new realm was groundbreaking.

But the game didn't start development as a *Mario* game – rather, the karts were populated with a generic man in overalls as placeholder art. When the team at Nintendo EAD was designing the sprites, they collectively decided that a character in a kart should be three 'heads' high – that way, you identify each racer and their kart easily enough, without too much strain. It was only about three months into

THE ANATOMY OF SUPER MARIO KART

SUPER MARIO KART HAS GONE ON TO INSPIRE A SLEW OF OTHER GAMES, BUT WHAT CAME TO INSPIRE THE NINTENDO DEVS BEHIND THE KART RACER IN THE FIRST PLACE?



F-ZERO

★ Nintendo wanted to make *Mario Kart* in order to stand alongside the single-player focused *F-Zero*, so that the console had broader appeal.



MARIO

★ Originally, a 'man in overalls' replaced Mario as kart driver, but this was changed when the dev team decided to test what it would look like having Mario in the game.



JAPANESE FOLKLORE

★ The 'thwomps' in *Mario Kart* are based on the 'nurikabe' in Japanese folklore: ugly, square spirits that take the form of walls to impede progress.

development that Nintendo decided to make the whole game a *Mario*-focused racer.

The general idea with the development of *Super Mario Kart* was to create a game that directly contrasted with SNES launch title *F-Zero* – a single-player only game with intricate tracks and elaborate mechanics. That way, the Nintendo console would have something for the lone-wolf racers out there, and something for the families and multiplayer-focused groups of gamers, too.

It was the multiplayer functionality of the game that got most people's attention when the game launched – it was a true party game on the home consoles, and one of the first to really hit that friendly/competitive nail on the head. This gameplay was no accident: Nintendo and Miyamoto actively set out to make a game capable of displaying two players on the same game screen simultaneously – something evident in the way single-player games are *still* split across the screen horizontally.

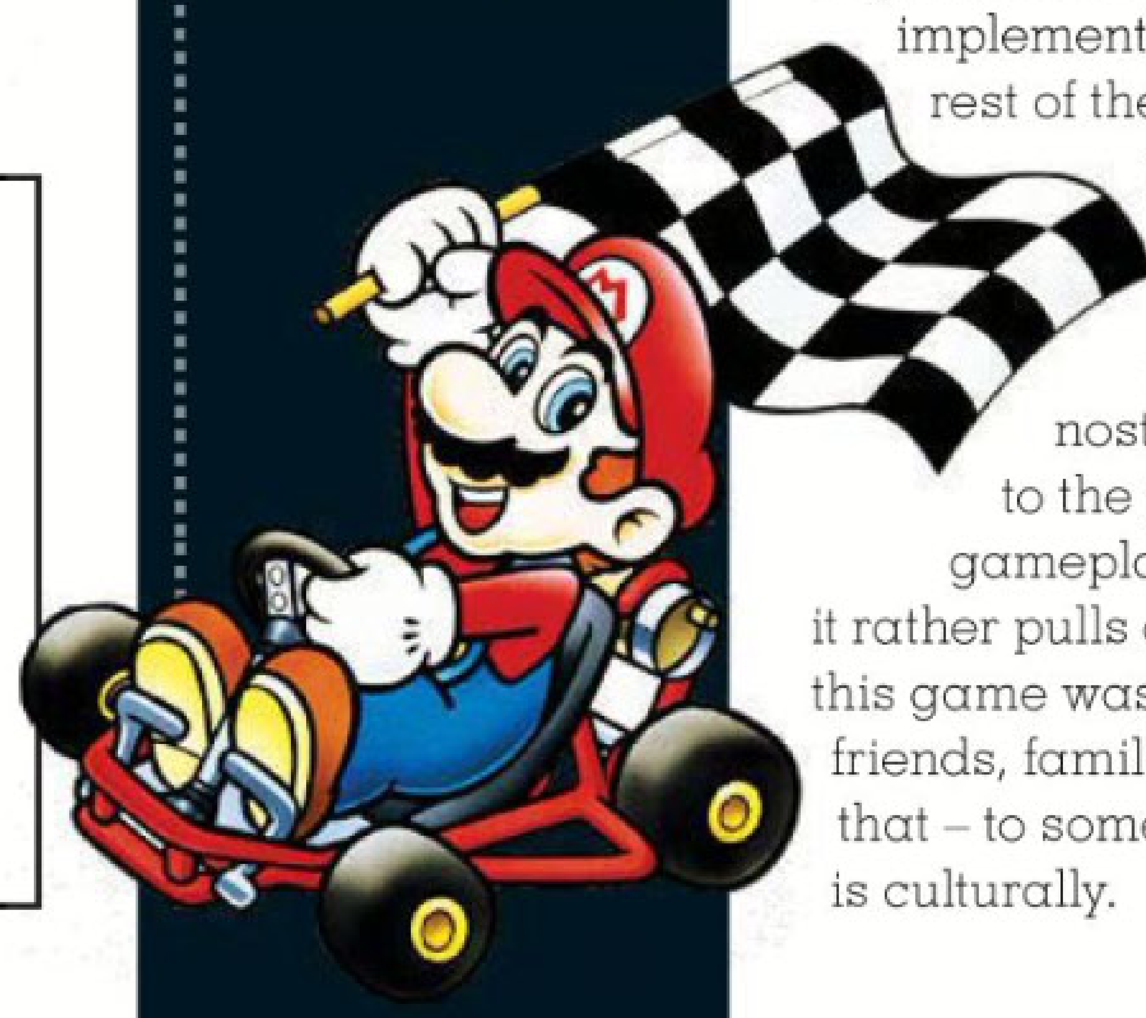
Because of the multiplayer focus, tracks and levels couldn't be as complex as the zones you'd find in *F-Zero*, but that actually ended up working in *Mario Kart*'s favour: the simplicity of the tracks meant the game was as pick-up-and-play as you could get – easy to learn, difficult to master. But within that simple formula, there are smaller ways Nintendo plays with the layout: between small shortcuts, zany power-ups and track-based boosts, very few races played out the same. At first look, each track was just a circuit with a finish line, but the more you play, the more you understand how the visual language of the track is actually pointing you at a certain shortcut or hidden feature. This played into the longevity of the game, and is largely the reason you *still* see tournaments of players competing in the game's time trial mode.

THE GAME WAS AS PICK-UP-AND-PLAY AS YOU COULD GET – IT WAS EASY TO LEARN, DIFFICULT TO MASTER

KEY FACTS

- Each character 'sprite' is actually rendered from 16 different angles, impressively giving that 3D illusion on a 2D plane
- *Super Mario Kart* is the first non-platform game to feature *Mario* characters
- *Super Mario Kart* managed to hit nine million sales during the lifetime of the SNES, the third-best on the console

■■■ The game also made the most of Nintendo's internally-developed Mode 7 texture wrapping – a technical marvel that made *Super Mario Kart* one of the best-looking games on the SNES (by a long way). Mode 7 allowed developers to select planes that were being worked on and rotate them freely, basically making 3D sprites in 2D software (or, at least, giving that illusion). To that end, *Super Mario Kart* introduced the DSP-1 chip – that's Digital Signal Processor – into the cartridge, which allowed easier and quicker 3D mathematics from the game's engine, courtesy of floating point calculations. The implementation of this chip paved the way for the rest of the SNES' lifespan: it became the most popular chip in SNES cartridges from then on.



Super Mario Kart has a place in many people's hearts because of the nostalgia that it evokes – that isn't down to the progressive programming, innovative gameplay or charming art direction alone. No, it rather pulls on something deeper – the idea that this game was mostly enjoyed by groups of people; friends, families, colleagues and so on. It's a game that – to some circles – is as important socially as it is culturally.



GAME CHANGERS

8 OTHER GAMES INSPIRED BY MARIO KART

SUPER MARIO KART WAS THE FIRST KART GAME TO HIT OUR CONSOLES, BUT IT WASN'T THE LAST. THE GAME'S RELEASE HERALDED THE START OF A NEW GENRE, AND OTHER DEVELOPERS VIED FOR THEIR CHANCES ON KART-RACING THRONE



CRASH TEAM RACING

■ THE FINAL *CRASH* game by Naughty Dog was designed with the same focus on replayability and metagame as *Crash 3: Warped*. Developers slotted design pillars into the kart-racing genre instead. It was a well-regarded *Mario Kart* clone. Controls were tight, so players could focus on maintaining speed and fun.



SONIC & SEGA ALL-STARS RACING

■ *ALL-STARS RACING* doesn't reinvent the wheel, but everything it does, it does well. Track design is multi-faceted and entertaining, complex but not confusing, and represents the height of what a kart racer can do. Multiplayer modes and presentation of the game made it the best kart game of the PS3/360 era.



SOUTH PARK RALLY

■ DESPITE THE LACK of involvement from Trey Parker and Matt Stone (and their criticism of the *South Park* games that Acclaim published), we had a soft spot for *South Park Rally*. It was a clunky and floaty mess, but as a mascot kart racer, it was fun, fast, full of fan service and had a multiplayer that actually worked.



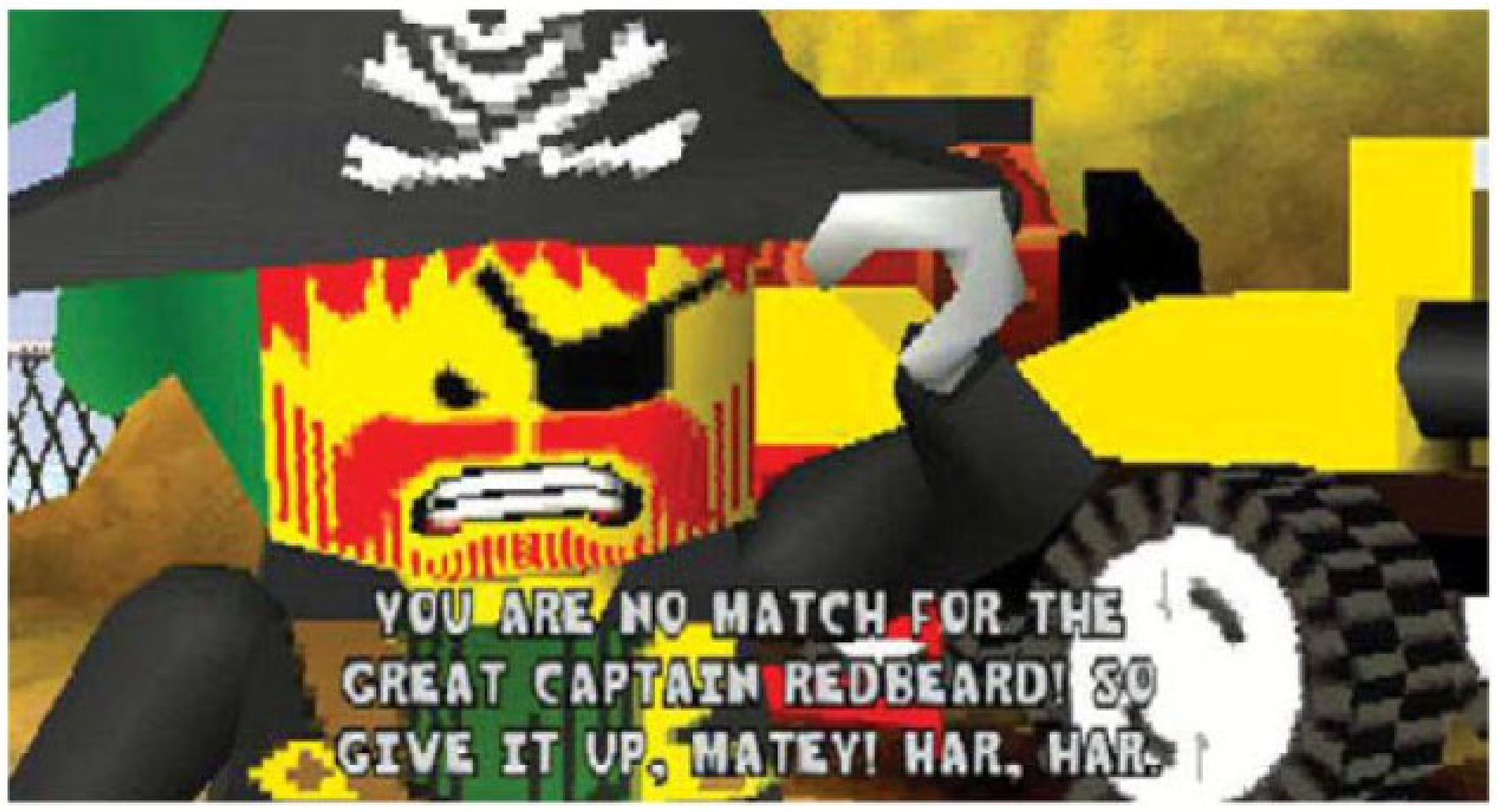
CHOCOBO RACING

■ *CHOCOBO RACING* IS the closest you're going to get to a *Final Fantasy* kart game, compiling characters, locations and items from *Final Fantasy* to *Final Fantasy VIII*. SquareSoft attempted to cash-in on the kart craze that permeated the industry: tracks were lazy, controls loose and unsatisfying, and it was very, very easy.



LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING

■ *LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING* FELT more like a game from the parent series than a pure kart game, as the main reason for its release was to get players making their own tracks, based on a template laid out in it, and in *ModNation Racers* before. The game never felt like a true craft-em-up, nor a true kart racer.



LEGO RACERS

■ THE BRIGHT, COLOURFUL and clean graphical presentation of the first Lego racing game was impressive, as were the world design and track design, but the rudimentary physics engine in the game was where it shone: the car would handle differently, making for a game that was ostensibly fun and experimental.



DIDDY KONG RACING

■ DESPITE THE WELL-ANIMATED characters, vibrant colour palette and fast-action racing, *Diddy Kong Racing*'s multiplayer modes and the replay value were poor. The game had an excellent Adventure mode and excelled when it came to the subtlety in the mechanics – more so than its Nintendo predecessor, *Mario Kart 64*.



SONIC DRIFT

■ RELEASED ON THE Game Gear, *Sonic Drift* was a lazy and cynical cash-in on *Mario Kart* – a game that didn't seem to understand what made *Super Mario Kart* so successful. Few options, four playable racers and bland track designs meant *Sonic Drift* never really had a chance at competing with *Super Mario Kart*.

THE VAULT

EAR FORCE STEALTH 420X HEADSET



MANUFACTURER: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£149.99**

WITH THE LATEST Xbox One wireless headset from Turtle Beach it feels like the company has really hit its stride. The setup couldn't be simpler, thanks to the USB adaptor that comes pre-paired with the headset, the sound is punchy and customisable, and the price is just the right side of premium.

We weren't hugely impressed by the sound customisation options on offer, with the bass boost, treble boost and bass & treble boost all making the sound a little fluffier. Instead, we opted to stick with the Natural Sound option. Regardless, the audio was really powerful, and everything from game audio, to music, to vocal performances came through clearly and cleanly. We tested it with a few games, but *Batman: Arkham Knight* was one of the more impressive – the Batmobile's 60mm cannon delivers one heck of a punch through these bad boys.

The design and build quality may be where the savings were made here, but we only say that because we're used to the beautifully padded ear cups of the Turtle Beach XO Four – comparatively, these cups are firmer and slightly less cushioned. They're still not uncomfortable, and thanks to their relatively low weight, they actually prove to be more comfortable over long periods. And considering we eked out over 13 hours of play-time before recharging, that's just as well.



WARP PIPE MUG

WARNING: This mug may contain large and unexplored dungeon areas, Piranha Plants, or just the drink that you poured into it just moments ago. *Probably* just that last one, but drink from this mug at your own risk.

www.firebox.com



FINAL FANTASY AC: CLOUD STRIFE: PLAY ARTS KAI VARIANT

This extremely detailed poseable figurine comes with his Fusion swords both assembled and in six interconnecting pieces, along with replacement arms and hands.

www.thinkgeek.com



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA LENTICULAR 3D LINK

For *Zelda* fans, this limited-edition 3D *The Legend Of Zelda* print is a must-have. The art features Links from across the series in a brilliant 3D design that moves as you do. It's framed nicely, too.

www.thinkgeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



THE GHOST OF THE MOUNTAINS

This beautiful design takes a simple piece of art featuring a balloon, the moon, and some mountains and turns them into something you might recognise from a certain classic title...

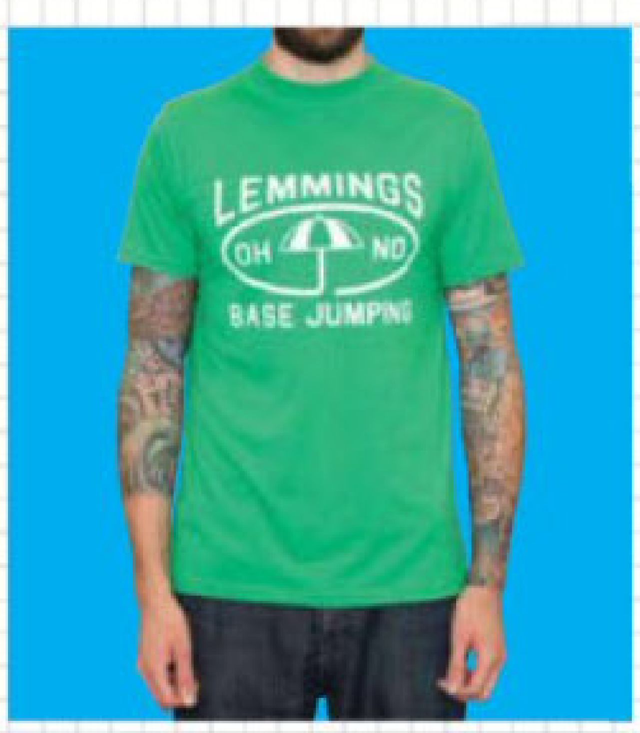
www.threadless.com



CONTROLLER KITTY

Mixing the ridiculously popular world of Hello Kitty with the just as stupidly popular videogame world to create what will probably be one of the best-selling shirts in the history of the all time and space.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



LEMMINGS BASE JUMPING

We're particularly fond of this one purely because it's understated, and only a select few of your friends will get the reference. Plus, it's a pretty stylish design that keeps things simple.

www.insertcoinclothing.com

XBOX ONE ELITE WIRELESS CONTROLLER



SOLD BY: **MICROSOFT** PRICE: **£119.99**

WE WERE A little surprised when Microsoft announced an all-new controller – after all, its standard Xbox One controller is pretty great. The new controller comes with a set of six thumbsticks, two D-pads, and a set of four paddles which can be magnetically clipped to the rear of the controller. These paddles, along with all the other buttons on the controller, are completely customisable – so you can change the button layouts to your own needs. It's expensive, but god damn do we want it.

www.store.microsoft.com

RAZER MAMBA MOUSE

SOLD BY: **RAZER** PRICE: **£TBA**

FOR ULTIMATE PRECISION, the Razer Mamba is here – with 16,000 dpi accuracy and customisable click feedback that lets you change click forces depending on the kind of games you're playing. And, thanks to the built-in charging you'll be able to play both wired and wirelessly – the response time is the same 1ms either way, so you can enjoy ultimate control and unrivalled flexibility. Plus, with pulsating lights that glow and fade to give you an ambient gaming experience, this is definitely one to watch.

www.razerzone.com



STEELSERIES STRATUS XL CONTROLLER



SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES**
PRICE: **€59.99**

AT FIRST GLANCE, this might look like a cheap alternative to the Xbox One's controller, but for those looking for a wireless experience on Android and Windows devices, this is the ideal choice. Thanks to XInput, the controller functions almost identically to an Xbox 360 controller when hooked up to Windows, giving you the most control possible. It's clear that SteelSeries took inspiration from both Microsoft's and Sony's designs, but the result is surprisingly good; as long as the weight and build quality is right this could be a winner.

www.steelseries.com

SINCLAIR ZX SPECTRUM BOOK: A VISUAL COMPENDIUM



PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**

WHILE OTHER BOOKS only talk about the power and games of their chosen consoles, this celebrates the visual side of the computer. At the front of the book you'll find beautiful photography of the console, with shots showing it off in all its glory. Then, the book transitions and includes screenshots of different games on each spread. These large prints are represented with striking artwork, and are accompanied by short reviews, developer quotes and behind-the-scenes information. The book also features game maps, loading screens, and stunning artwork from renowned artists.

Elsewhere in the book you'll find details of the Russian development scene during the mid-Nineties, which was at the core of the console's success, following it through to the modern day. You'll also find some incredible artwork from Oliver Frey, the designer behind some of the Spectrum's most iconic game boxes. The whole thing flows in chronological order, starting in 1982 and progressing right through until the Spectrum's twilight years in the early Nineties. Interviews with leading ZX Spectrum artists are also included, alongside stunning showcases of their pixel work.

A collector's edition, encased in a polystyrene parcel with an outer card slipcase will set you back a little more, but frankly doesn't seem worth it when the standard edition is so sumptuously printed. Across the almost 300 pages of stunning printed work you can really appreciate the colours and vibrancy that the ZX Spectrum created, and though some may want more text to accompany each game, we really appreciate the focus on visuals. A lovely dedication to a great console.

www.funstockretro.co.uk

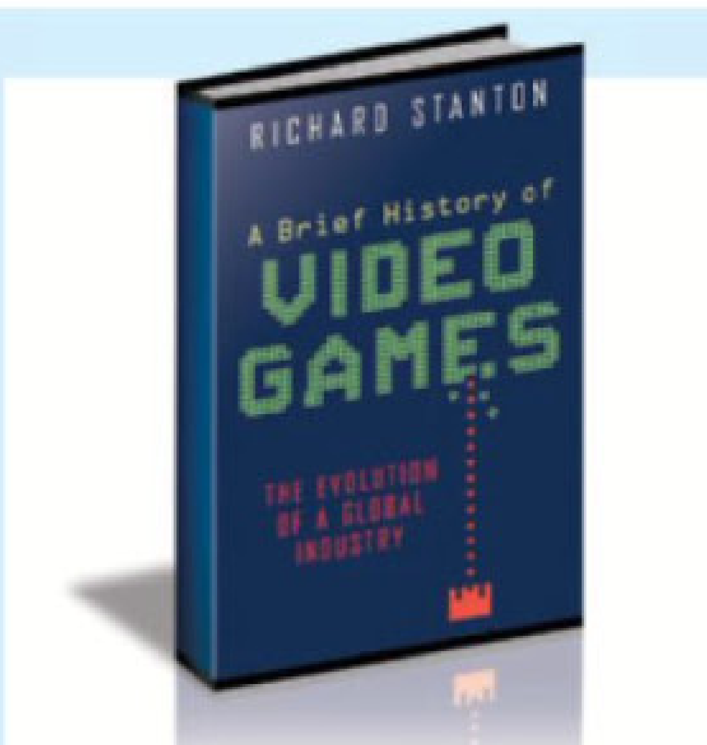
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RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER: THE OFFICIAL ART BOOK

This title is perfect for those looking forward to Lara's epic next-gen adventure, as it offers a behind-the-scenes trip into the latest instalment of the series. You'll get to see concept art, 3D renders, development sketches, along with a commentary throughout.

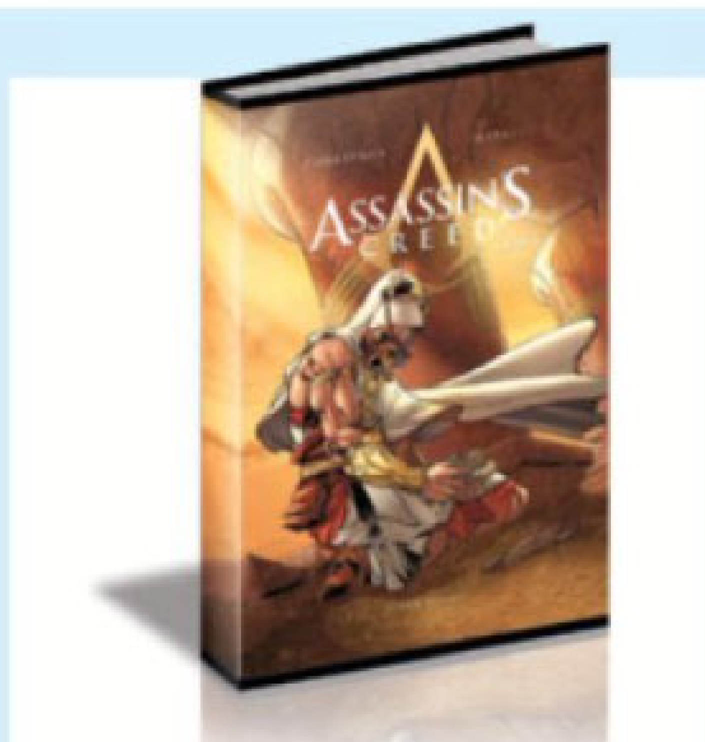
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES

This trip back through time will take you from the very first wood-panelled Pong arcade machines to the modern day graphical powerhouses that sit under our TVs today. The illustrations show how technological advances have brought games from simple dots on the screen to blockbusters.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED – LEILA (VOL. 6)

With the second in the *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* titles on the horizon, now is the perfect time to dive back into the graphic novels – the basis for the three characters in the games. The latest book sees the Sceptre of Aset stolen from seasoned Assassin El Cakr by the mysterious Leila...

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